



# Case studies

## Benefits of community growing: Older people and dementia sufferers

Over the last few years there has been a growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of community growing for physical and mental wellbeing. Horticultural and other tasks involved in community gardening (such as regular exercise) alongside healthier eating patterns (usually the result of eating fresh produce grown in the garden) are often cited in such research.

The Growing Well project was set up by FCFCG in 2014 to provide support, record and share good practice in this field, and to help other groups who want to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits of their work.

These case studies from projects that participated in the Growing Well programme highlight how therapeutic gardening is a very effective way of tackling the loneliness and social isolation often experienced by older people and dementia sufferers, combining meaningful activity with exposure to nature in a communal setting. Providing meaningful activity, supporting independence and enabling residents to take part in physical exercise are all recognised as key components of good quality care by the Care Quality Commission.

The case studies demonstrate the variety of programmes on offer and include testimonials from participants and useful advice from projects on implementing and evaluating work.



# Growing Support, Bristol

Growing Support works with the residents of care homes in the city and surrounding area, supporting them to participate in therapeutic gardening activities in their own garden. A Growing Support gardener is usually over 80 and living with multiple long-term conditions and have complex care needs. This often includes dementia, Parkinson's disease, heart disease, the after effects of a stroke, poor eyesight or poor hearing. Most have limited mobility and are wheelchair users and struggle to go into the garden or complete a gardening task unaided.

Growing Support focuses on addressing loneliness, social isolation and the negative effects of inactivity. The Growing Support Growing Well report commented: "When working with people with dementia the focus should be on the impact on the person – not the completion of the task. Very often we don't get much done – we may plant and re-plant the same things over and over again! What matters most is that the person you are working with has been outdoors, had some exercise, socialised and feel as though they have achieved something."

The group sets up gardening clubs in care homes and supports residents to undertake gardening tasks using adapted tools, raised beds and containers. Sessions are led by a Growing Support Social and Therapeutic Horticulture Facilitator, supported by care staff and community volunteers.

Typical activities include setting seeds, potting on, thinning out, dead-heading, tying-up, watering, weeding, harvesting fruit and vegetables, taking cuttings, composting, willow weaving, felt-making, mosaic making, making



bird feeders and bug hotels or clearing up autumn leaves.

A particular focus of the activities is to encourage sensory stimulation, reminiscence and socialising. Plants are selected to support this, such as fragrant herbs or *Stachys Lanata* (Lambs Ears), whose leaves have a lovely soft texture.

Growing Support measures its success by observing the impact of gardening sessions on members of the gardening clubs, looking at who they have reached, the activities they have participated in and observed impact such as an agitated person becoming calmer or a distressed person beginning to smile and laugh.

Key outcomes include:

- Increase in social interaction with other residents and the community
- Improved sense of belonging, sense of achievement and self-esteem
- Improved mood and behaviour, being calmer, less restless and less distressed

The story of Doreen typifies the impact of Growing Support's work. When Growing Support staff arrived at her care home they could hear Doreen shouting and crying in her room. The care staff said she had been distressed all night and calling out for her mother. They could do nothing to console her.

One of Growing Support's more experienced volunteers took Doreen by the hand and led her into the garden where they walked until Doreen became calmer. Next, the group leader worked with Doreen, planting mint and chatting together.

Gradually the group leader drew Doreen into the group until she was working side by side with another resident. By the end of the session Doreen was smiling and laughing and pointing to her work with pride. The carers were amazed by the transformation. The following week they told Growing Support that Doreen had slept well that night!

<http://growingsupport.co.uk>

"Loneliness and social isolation are growing issues for older people, particularly for people with dementia. The prevalence of loneliness amongst people living in residential care is twice that of people living in the community."

(Extract from Growing Support's Growing Well report)



# Hammersmith Community Gardens Association, London

Hammersmith Community Gardens Association (HCGA) is a local environmental charity which manages several community gardens in Hammersmith and Fulham. It runs a range of projects which include conservation training schemes, volunteer gardening sessions, health and wellbeing projects, environmental playschemes and environmental education in local schools.

HCGA has also worked with dementia sufferers, creating a sensory garden for residents at St Vincent's House Care Home in Hammersmith. Part of the garden had become overgrown and the walled garden area was no longer wheelchair accessible, meaning that patients could only access the main patio area.

HCGA's Growing Well report commented: "A garden is a place where a person with dementia can stay familiar with memorable activities such as planting and digging, growing flowers or vegetables, walking around the garden or sitting, relaxing and enjoying the natural sounds, sights and smells around them in the garden. It can also help people with dementia talk about their past lives by provoking memories of the gardening activities they were involved in when they were younger.

"We therefore wanted to provide the residents at St Vincent's with a visually stimulating garden, that would provoke their senses and memories. We also wanted to create somewhere that the staff could also use to relax."

The HGCA team decided that the raised bed would be planted with a selection of multisensory plants ranging in colour, size and scent, and that the overgrown walled garden area would become a wildlife garden fully accessible to residents.

Some residents came out to watch and help with the raised bed planting, which included thyme, lavender and mint; courgettes, pumpkin and fennel and edible flowers such as marigolds.

As part of the project, staff at St Vincent's also enjoyed training on topics such as food growing and green care. This is helping them to gain maximum benefit from the garden and has equipped them with the knowledge and confidence to develop therapeutic gardening and food-growing projects.

The garden now provides a perfect place for residents to get together and socialise, relax and keep active; it also provides an opportunity to spend time with their families in more privacy – all of which greatly improve their wellbeing.

St Vincent's Activities Coordinator Rita Matuseviciute said that the garden renovation has made a big, positive difference to people's

lives at St Vincent's, with the residents watering the plants and watching how they grow day by day. Rita added: "It's really exciting, not for only residents and families, but also for the staff."

The St Vincent's project was funded by a grant from Hammersmith United Charities, while HCGA's Plant a Seed, Grow Well Project Co-ordinator was on hand to provide advice on dementia gardening. This is an NHS-funded project, based around green care and related activities, to train healthcare staff working in residential and other care settings.

<http://hcg.org.uk>

## Resources

### Other case studies in this series:

- Benefits of community growing, green spaces and outdoor education - summary of research and evidence
- Health and wellbeing
- Mental health
- Refugees and asylum seekers

[www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/health-wellbeing-case-studies-ellerman-project](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/health-wellbeing-case-studies-ellerman-project)

### Which tool to use?

A new guide to evaluating health and wellbeing outcomes for community growing programmes.

[www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/whichtool](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/whichtool)

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