

INSIGHTS

Is 'Horticultural Therapy' a myth?

Cherry Tree Nursery

The view from a well-established horticulturally-based charity in the United Kingdom.

Horticulture or community?

Groups of the vulnerable, excluded, forgotten and needy have, for hundreds of years, found working in land-based projects to be beneficial to their mental and physical wellbeing. Projects have been set up for a wide variety of groups including prisoners, refugees, the blind, the elderly, those with learning difficulties, physical disabilities, mental health problems, migrants, the homeless, and those struggling with addictions. It has long been assumed that the undoubted benefits of these projects arose from the value of horticulture as a therapeutic activity, and the projects came to be referred to as 'Horticultural Therapy' projects.

In recent years, the name 'Horticultural Therapy' was felt to be somewhat demeaning, and 'Social and Therapeutic Horticulture' was preferred. People running such projects began to define themselves as practitioners of this profession, and to draw up guidelines and offer specific qualifications in this form of horticulture.

Cherry Tree Nursery is a commercial plant nursery producing quality garden plants and hardy nursery stock on a four and a half acre site in Bournemouth, United Kingdom. The 150 volunteers, who work in all aspects of the nursery, for as long as they wish and need, have severe and enduring mental illness. For many of them the nursery offers a safe haven and a lifeline. In-house research carried out by the project indicates that they benefit from being in a location where they can feel safe, unjudged and unthreatened. Ask them why they value the project, and it is the meaningful occupation, the purpose, the dignity it gives them, and the companionship of being part of something bigger, that they really value. Horticulture is rarely specifically referred to. Since the project's inception, there have been a number of volunteers who have returned to open employment as a

result of the therapeutic environment that exists at Cherry Tree Nursery, and many of them have recovered their mental stability and learned to laugh again.

Horticulture provides the right environment, the ability to feel the wind and the sun, to listen to the birds, to watch the butterflies. It provides the opportunity to work together and meet others, and a useful environment to produce something people want to buy to help keep the project going, in fact plant sales cover half the projects' running costs. However, many volunteers are not interested in plants, and this lack of interest will not necessarily change. Not everyone will stay, some are scared of plants, seeing them as something frightening, poisonous, dangerous, prickly, causing rashes or illness, something to be avoided, even dreaded. They have a lack of connection, don't like, or are afraid of, being outside, of getting their hands dirty. The project's great value, and what has helped literally save lives, is that it provides a community. Cherry Tree Nursery is like a village, somewhere people come together, learn to care for and support each other. To quote one of the volunteers "it wouldn't matter if we made pies, it's the working together that counts".

Whilst only a small number of the volunteers love plants, for the majority, plants are the means to an end: friendship, warmth and laughter. It is quite possible to work at Cherry Tree Nursery for years without doing any horticultural work, and many volunteers still can't name any of the plants. In fact, research has indicated that there are a large number of volunteers who would not attend the project if it only offered horticultural work.

As a profession, horticulture is far from therapeutic. The suicide rate is high, as it is for agriculture, the pressure can be intense, the life is often isolated, and wages are low. For the struggling nurseryman or market gardener, the concept of therapeutic horticulture might seem laughable. For example, one of Cherry Tree Nursery's wholesale providers grows over 2.5 million plants every year, and employs a total of 82 staff, all of them from Eastern Europe, because no British worker has applied for a job at his nursery for five years.

As Cherry Tree Nursery approaches its twentieth anniversary, experience has led to the conclusion that the definition of 'therapeutic horticulture' is approaching the issue from the wrong end. Rather, it is the use of horticulture to provide a therapeutic community, where people have time for each other and value and cherish each other.

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