

# Growing Health – making gardening and food growing a natural choice for your patients



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**Introduction** It is widely recognised that gardening and food growing can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. Being outdoors and actively engaging with the natural environment is good for both physical and mental health. Here we present the evidence for this, including examples where the many health benefits of gardening and food growing have been used by the health services to improve patient outcomes.

## How do gardening and food growing benefit health and wellbeing?

Published evidence of the benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing was reviewed by Schmutz *et al.* (2014). Full references are included in the review, which can be downloaded from [www.growinghealth.info](http://www.growinghealth.info)

### Mental health and wellbeing

- Regular involvement in community gardening contributes to improved social contact and interaction, sense of connection and belonging.
- Community gardeners report improvement in happiness and life satisfaction.
- Meaningful nature based activities can lead to improved sense of achievement, build confidence and self-esteem, and support development of new skills.

### Dementia

- Being in a garden and taking part in horticultural activities can improve quality of life for people living with dementia.
- Structured therapeutic gardening activities can have a positive impact on sense of wellbeing, cognitive abilities, communication and engagement and help to alleviate symptoms such as agitation and aggressive behaviour.

### Stress and stress related illness

- Being in the natural setting of the garden can reduce stress, increase relaxation and improve recovery from stress.
- Engaging in gardening during rehabilitation from stress can facilitate feelings of calm and relaxation, as well as competence, enjoyment, curiosity and hope.
- Gardens with the dimensions of 'refuge', 'calm', 'nature' and 'species rich' were reported to provide a restorative environment for stressed individuals.

### Healthy weight

- Gardening tasks provide a mixture of low and moderate intensity physical activity supporting gardeners to reach physical activity recommendations, burn more calories and contribute to healthy weight management.
- Access to home-grown fresh produce helps to increase consumption of fruit and vegetables and improve attitudes to healthy eating.
- Male and female community gardeners were found to have lower body mass index than their non-gardening siblings and neighbours.

### Substance misuse

- Gardening has been shown to make the lives of people struggling with substance misuse more meaningful, provide purpose and a feeling of being needed, as well as pleasure, tranquillity, distraction and opportunities for reflection.
- The patience required for nurturing plants helps reduce the impulse for instant gratification, one of the drivers for substance abuse.
- For prisoners with a history of substance abuse, gardening was shown to reduce hostility, risk-taking, substance abuse and depression at release.

## Case Study Sydenham Garden

- A charity promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- Founded in 2002 by a group of residents, including a local GP, converting a neglected nature reserve into a community garden.
- Commissioned by Lewisham CCG to provide therapeutic gardening and creative art sessions for co-workers.
- Weekly sessions for adult mental health groups focusing on recovery and rehabilitation, and for people with dementia on improving quality of life and stopping symptoms from worsening.
- Received 269 referrals in the year 2014/15.
- Average unit cost per session is £10/hour/co-worker.
- Typical placement lasts 12 months



## Commissioning gardening and food growing

Growing Health has identified many gardening and food growing projects that are currently commissioned by either Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Local Authority Public Health or Social Services to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes. Many of the initiatives have established links with local GP practices, examples are shown below.

**Table 1. Commissioned community food growing projects**

| Project name                                                      | Location                                                                                                           | Commission and links to GP practices                                                                                        | Health/wellbeing area                                                 | Evaluation                                                                                                                                               | Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Growing Opportunities Ideal for All                               | Sandwell and the Black Country                                                                                     | Sandwell MBC Public Health GP referrals                                                                                     | Obesity, physical activity, mental wellbeing and community resilience | Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)                                                                                                        | Contribution to enhanced experiences of wellbeing, social inclusion, social relationships and networks<br>Improved knowledge and actions relating to healthy diet and physical activity<br>Contribution towards improved learning, capacities and skills<br>Regeneration of communities and sites using an asset based model                                            |
| Growing Well                                                      | Kendal, Cumbria                                                                                                    | Cumbria CCG Social prescribing model with GP practices                                                                      | Mental health                                                         | GAD7<br>PHQ 9<br>Client Services<br>Receipt Inventory                                                                                                    | Positive changes in<br>• Confidence and self-esteem<br>• Development of emotional resilience<br>• Life skills and hopefulness<br>• Supporting people to live healthier and be more active, reducing social isolation and increasing life expectancy                                                                                                                     |
| Master Gardener Programme Garden Organic                          | Lincolnshire<br>Leicestershire<br>Warwickshire<br>Breckland<br>London<br>Boroughs of Camden, Islington and Croydon | Public Health in local authorities<br>General public health promotion<br>Referrals via community groups and health agencies | Healthier lifestyles<br>Healthier weight<br>Mental health & wellbeing | Composite questionnaires (health, social and environment) for supported growers and volunteer Master Gardeners<br><br>Social Return on Investment (SROI) | Sustained positive behavioural changes in relation to healthy lifestyles, social and environmental aspects.<br>Positive impact on<br>• Intake of fruit and vegetables<br>• Time spent doing physical activity<br>• Life satisfaction<br>• Satisfaction with feeling part of a community<br>• Improved knowledge and skills<br>SROI - £10.70 return on every £1 invested |
| Plant a Seed – Grow Well Hammersmith Community Garden Association | London<br>Boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham                                                                       | Health Education for North West London<br>CPD for health professionals<br>GP referrals to gardening group                   | Greencare within health services                                      | Uptake and impact of CPD training<br>WEMWBS for patients                                                                                                 | Positive feedback from CPD sessions with health professional attending reporting improved knowledge and confidence to deliver green care sessions with patients and clients in their place of work.                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Sydenham Garden                                                   | London Borough of Lewisham                                                                                         | Lewisham CCG<br>Receives GP referrals                                                                                       | Adult mental health<br>Dementia                                       | Likert-scale questionnaires<br>WEMWBS<br>Interviews                                                                                                      | Positive change for co-workers in<br>• Ability to undergo physical activity<br>• Mental wellbeing<br>• Social inclusion and interaction<br>• Levels of independence<br>• Quality of life<br>• Development of life outside Sydenham Garden<br>Improvement in mental wellbeing shown by increase in WEMWBS score                                                          |

## How can GP practices work with community gardening?

- Establish partnerships with local community gardening projects and routes for referrals for patients e.g. through social prescribing models.
- Encourage the development of community gardening and food growing projects and support CCGs and Public Health to commission them to deliver health outcomes.
- Build knowledge and confidence in staff teams in using gardening as a tool through promotion, knowledge sharing and training.
- Capitalise on the skills of local volunteers e.g. Master Gardeners, to support projects.
- Develop action-based research to investigate the cost-effectiveness of food growing programmes compared with other interventions.
- Recognise the added value offered by food growing; providing environmentally sustainable solutions, increasing biodiversity and ecosystem value and production of accessible healthy food.

## Conclusion

The evidence and the outcomes achieved by projects throughout the UK confirm the many benefits to health and wellbeing of gardening and growing your own food. GPs can confidently recommend gardening and food growing to patients as an easily accessible form of exercise and social activity, and a realistic choice for Primary Care.

**Growing Health** is a joint project between Garden Organic and Sustain funded by the Tudor Trust. The project provides a network of support for health professionals, commissioners, academics and food growing projects and aims to make community food growing a natural part of the health service. For further information and to discover what support is available in your area please visit [www.growinghealth.info](http://www.growinghealth.info) or email [mlennartsson@gardenorganic.org.uk](mailto:mlennartsson@gardenorganic.org.uk)

### References

Schmutz U., M. Lennartsson, S. Williams, M. Devereaux and G. Davies (2014). *The benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing*. Garden Organic and Sustain. [online] [www.growinghealth.info](http://www.growinghealth.info)

