

Healing Gardens

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Healing gardens have been known for many centuries and included medicinal herbs and plants. They were often located in cloistered gardens in monasteries and temples. Today, healing gardens are often found in the grounds of hospitals and hospices to provide comfort and peace. Hospice Peterborough has a wonderful garden behind its building on Rubidge St. Stress, whether it be in the form of an illness, bereavement, job loss or stressful life styles, can often be alleviated by turning to the natural world. Whether our working day is regimented by machinery, meetings or deadlines, we can all find relief in the natural growth rhythms of a garden. It has been shown quite conclusively that hospital patients recover more quickly when they have a view of a garden.

Having suffered both a bereavement and serious illness over the last 5 years, I know how therapeutic a garden can be. We can create healing gardens in our own private spaces. I know that when I get out in the garden tending my plants, the time flies by and I can often forget my troubles.

Plants give us pleasure and can bring healing through our 5 senses. Plan to include plants that appeal with fragrance, colour and shape, touch sound and even taste. Scent is often a key to healing as it evokes memories and certain plant oils are very uplifting. Try brushing against rosemary, basil and lemon balm in the herb garden. To me a rose is not a true rose unless it is perfumed. Try some of the old fashioned roses such as Therese Bugnet if you want a wonderful, heady perfume. Honeysuckle, lilies and lavender are all examples of beautifully scented plants. Some plants such as night scented stock and nicotiana release their scent in the evening. Planted round a deck or veranda, it is wonderful to sit out of an evening and enjoy their fragrance. Spring bulbs such as narcissi and grape hyacinths have a marvellous perfume that can really lift the spirits and help to get rid of the winter blues. Plant them close to the house or walkways so that you can really enjoy them.

Colour, too, can lift the spirit. An all white garden with lots of green foliage is extremely

restful and really comes into its own in the evening. White becomes almost luminous at dusk and is often a fragrant garden as many white flowered plants exude scent at night. Pastels can be very comforting and soft. Think of pink astilbe, blue delphiniums, pale yellow yarrow and the wonderful shades of perennial geraniums. Hot colours such as the oranges and reds of day lilies, dahlias and calendulas are stimulating.

Japanese style gardens with their carefully pruned plants are a good model for a healing garden. The strong sense of design and order is calming to the mind and the predominance of green foliage sets a quiet mood. Quiet places to sit and gaze are important, especially in the dappled light of a tree.

There are many plants that have wonderful textures that invite touching. Children love to touch the soft, furry leaves of lamb's ears and some of the scented geraniums. Some fascinating plants such as fuchsia, antirrhinums and impatiens seed heads will pop or open up when squeezed. Run your hand over the unusual bark of some of the birches and maples and be fascinated.

One of the mainstays of a healing garden involves sound. Sound, like scent, can trigger memories and can bring to mind happy incidents of the past. These can have a psychologically healing effect, especially against depression and as an antidote to the strains of our hectic lives. Sounds can be produced by the movement of wind through shrubs and trees, think of birch and aspen leaves rustling gently. I love to hear the soothing hum of bumble bees at the height of summer. Water is also important in a healing garden, whether it is something large such as a waterfall or a small bubbler. I have a small recycling pump which pumps water around an interesting pot with some small stones placed on the top. The gentle slashing is very relaxing when enjoying a glass of wine on the deck in an evening! The reflective surface of still water can help a busy mind quiet down. Water also attracts birds, butterflies, dragonflies and frogs, adding another pleasurable dimension to a garden.

Imagine walking through your garden and nibbling on nasturtium leaves and trying different herbs. I can't wait to pick sun warmed tomatoes and eat them right there in the garden!

Hopefully you will see your garden as a sanctuary bringing refreshment, a place of growth, change and peace. Gardens are ours to design to express our personal needs whether they are wild and romantic or orderly and tidy. The garden is an opportunity for self expression which can be unique to you and a spiritual haven. I know that I have found enormous comfort in my gardens, even though they can be frustrating at times when things don't grow according to plan! Enjoy, relax and don't stress out. Life is too short!

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