



Gardening Together

A resource to help develop community gardens and residential green spaces into dementia inclusive gardens





CONTENTS

01. Introduction	05
About this booklet	05
About the author	05
02. Gardening together	06
Engaging Dementia and Dementia: Understanding Together	06
Living with dementia	06
03. Benefits of gardening for people with dementia	07
What makes a garden dementia-inclusive?	07
How does gardening help people with dementia?	07
How does connecting with nature improve our quality of life?	08
04. Designing a community garden to include people living with dementia	09
Tips on how to create a dementia inclusive garden	10
Planning yearly activities	13
05. The rising trend of community gardens in Ireland today	14
06. Running garden days for older adults and people with dementia	15
Setting the date	15
Before you begin	15
On the day	16
Health and safety	16
07. Garden therapy in practice	18
08. Garden therapy in residential care	20
09. Useful resources	21



01. Introduction

About this booklet

This booklet shows you how to make your community garden a welcoming space for older people and people living with dementia. It has lots of tips and ideas for anyone planning to make a garden or outdoor activities - for people with dementia, their family, friends, carers and supporters.

Creating a garden can bring meaning and happiness into your life. It can help you make new friends and recall happy memories.

We know that connecting with nature benefits body, mind and spirit. Many people look to gardening and other outdoor activities to boost their health and wellbeing.

About the author

Joyce Fitzpatrick is a nature therapist, trainer and botanical journalist. She has been working with plants, gardens and people for over 25 years. After studying botany and biochemistry, she went on to specialise in social and therapeutic horticulture at Coventry University in 2019 and is currently setting up a community garden and bringing nature therapy to people of all ages.

For more information about Joyce and her work, visit www.inspiredbynature.ie



02. Gardening together

Irish people have always felt a connection with the land. Working side by side during harvest and thatching, it was the farming life that held rural communities together. Nowadays people may not have the same sense of purpose and belonging, and they can feel lonely and isolated. Gardening offers them a chance to get together with others and feel they have a place in the community.

Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist, wrote about the powerful benefits of spending time in nature.

He said:

“ I cannot say exactly how nature exerts its calming and organizing effects on our brains, but I have seen in my patients the restorative and healing powers of nature and gardens, even for those who are deeply disabled neurologically. In many cases, gardens and nature are more powerful than any medication. ”

Engaging Dementia and Dementia: Understand Together

Since 2015, the charity **Engaging Dementia** has been offering training on garden activities for people with dementia. Working with TrinityHaus (part of Trinity College Dublin), it helped create a dementia-friendly garden at Bloom in 2017. During the pandemic, Engaging Dementia asked Joyce Fitzpatrick to create Flourishing, a series of videos about the blessings of nature for older people.

Dementia: Understand Together is a national campaign run by the HSE. It aims to increase public awareness and understanding of dementia, and to inspire people from all sections of society to stand together with the many people who are affected by dementia. It is supported by national organisations and community champions. Together they are taking actions to ensure people living with dementia and their families can stay connected in their communities.

Living with dementia

The term ‘dementia’ covers a range of conditions that affect the brain. Dementia affects a person’s thinking, behaviour and ability to do everyday tasks. It can interfere with a person’s social or working life. Everybody’s experience of living with dementia is different and the support they need will change over time.

For a person living with dementia, it is important for their health and wellbeing to continue doing the things they enjoy, or to discover new hobbies. Staying active - mentally, socially and physically - can boost their quality of life and slow down the progression of dementia.

03. Benefits of gardening for people with dementia

What makes a garden dementia inclusive?

A dementia inclusive garden is designed to meet the needs and wishes of people with dementia. It is a place where they can enjoy spending time outdoors among nature.

How does gardening help people with dementia?

Activities and therapies that are based in nature can help anyone living with dementia. They can benefit from the healing aspects of being in a positive growing environment, spending time in a stress-free place with people who share similar interests.

Gardening:

- Wakes up all your senses - sight, sound, touch, smell and taste come back to life.
- Lets you live in the moment and look ahead with hope - for example, caring for seedlings that you can watch growing and flowering.
- Connects you with other people - sharing the work and the joy in a safe place.



How does connecting with nature improve our quality of life?



Physical benefits

Gardening can provide a dose of exercise, which is good for overall health. Gardening is both an aerobic and muscular activity as it usually requires a lot of movement. It can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and can help to restore dexterity, balance and strength.



Cognitive benefits

Gardening is good exercise for the brain as well as the body. It helps preserve, and even improve, cognitive functions as it involves planning, organising and making decisions.



Psychological and emotional benefits

Gardening gives people the opportunity to look ahead. Nurturing plants means caring for something that will grow and flower in the future. It often involves being creative and learning new skills, which can build self-esteem and confidence. Being active and engaged outdoors also helps lower anxiety or depression, particularly when activities are chosen carefully.



Social benefits

Gardening provides opportunities for connection with others, by working together and sharing the enjoyment of nurturing plants and flowers. Teamwork, collaboration, making new friends and planning for the future can create a strong sense of belonging and meaning.



Spiritual benefits

Time in nature is deeply holistic and healing. It can bring comfort and help people feel part of the wider universe. Any green space is a wonderful place for people with dementia, where they can reminisce, meditate and allow their senses to be awakened.

04. Designing a community garden to include people living with dementia

You don't need extensive knowledge of gardening techniques to begin. Even short activities such as arranging flowers, creating art with leaves or helping care for a houseplant can bring great joy and a sense of purpose.

Start by thinking about what people living with dementia would like to do in a garden. Then plan in detail how they can do it safely.



Consider favourite features

- A quiet place to sit and look around.
- Raised beds or vegetable plots to look after.
- Flowers with bright colours and strong scents.
- Sounds such as running water or rustling grasses.
- Plants that bring back memories.
- Fruit and vegetables you can harvest and eat.
- Clear signage, labels and signposts.
- Handrails on paths and steps.

Tips on how to create a dementia inclusive garden

Create a welcoming look

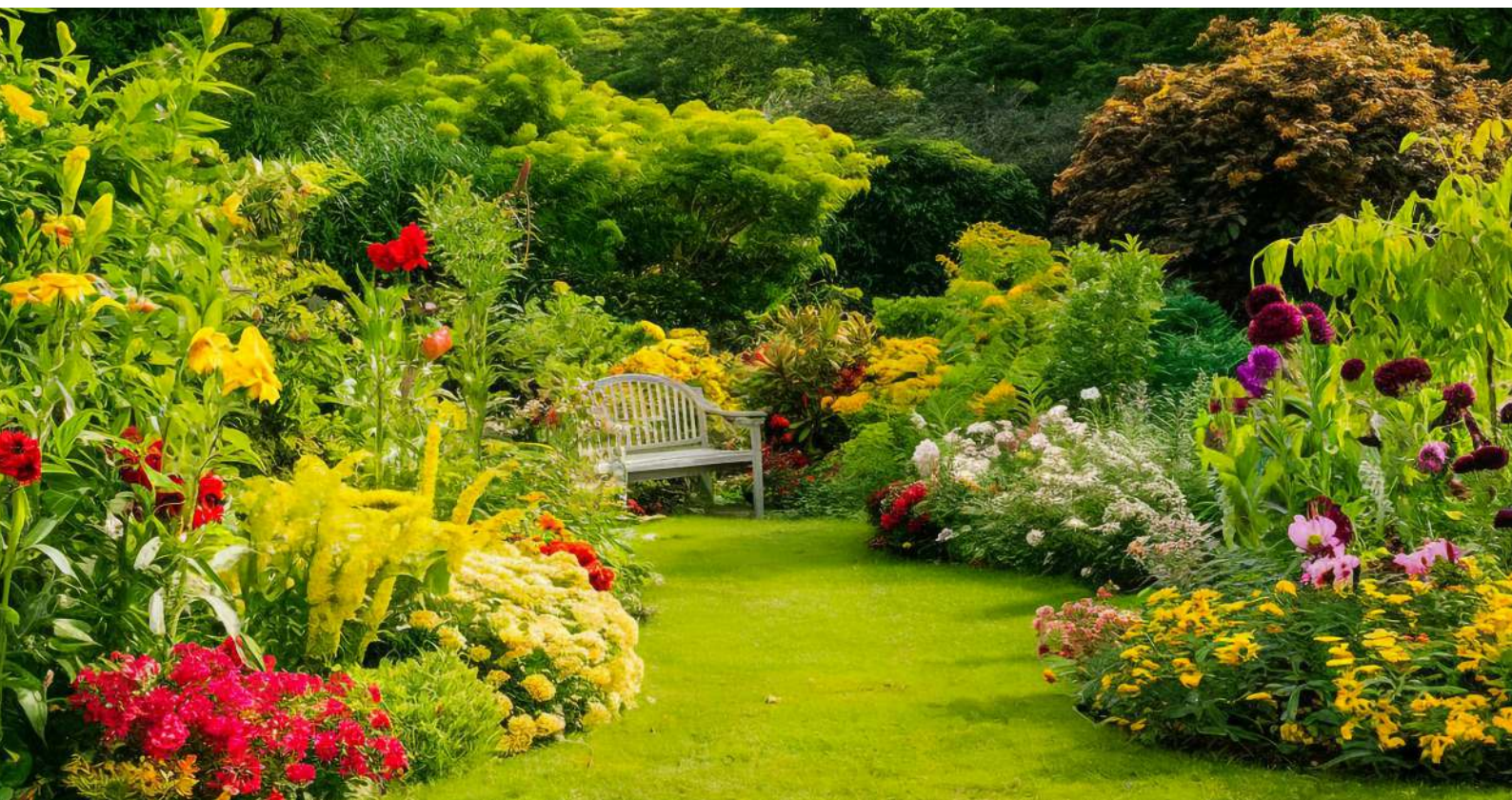
A garden that is open, colourful and easy to access will be more inviting than one that looks hidden or shady. It should be somewhere you would like to spend time with family and friends.

Consider accessibility

A garden or outdoor space that is easy to get around will encourage people to spend time there.

Here are some ways to make your garden accessible:

- Lay out wide easy-to-follow paths.
- Level the surfaces, leaving nothing to trip over - look out for things like loose paving stones or straggling bushes.
- Grow plants in raised beds and big tubs so they are within reach of people with wheelchairs or walking frames.
- Paint the edges of steps so they are clearly visible.
- Paint handrails in bright colours.
- Put up clear signs showing the way to places like the tool shed and the toilet.



Provide chances to join in

- Doing regular jobs such as filling bird feeders or sweeping leaves can give a sense of ownership and can build up self-confidence.
- Tools should be brightly coloured and lightweight, so they are easy to find and easy to handle. Take care to tidy them away in the correct place after every session.

Keep it manageable

- Choose plants that are easy to look after. For example, perennials may be simpler to grow than annuals as they need less attention.
- Offer garden jobs that suit people's abilities. For example, they may be strong enough to handle a trowel but not a spade. Or if they use a wheelchair, they may be able to pick tomatoes from a tub but not berries off bushes.
- In poor weather, make sure you can provide indoor options, such as flower arranging or sowing seeds in trays.





Create an interesting journey

- Features like a shed or pond can be a point of interest and somewhere to go in the garden. They can also help people find their way around.
- Trees, sculptures, bird tables, ponds and waterfalls add interest all year round.
- Features that attract wildlife, such as flowers for bees and feeders for birds, are interesting to watch as well as good for nature.

Appeal to the senses

- Sight - colourful plants that flower at different times of the year.
- Sound - trickling water, rustling reeds and wind chimes.
- Smell - scented flowers and shrubs, including herbs.
- Taste - fruit, salad and veg to grow and harvest.
- Touch - from crusty bark to silky petals, a range of things to touch or pick (making sure there are no thorns or nettles).

Provide seating and shelter

- Place seats where there is something enjoyable to look at.
- Avoid putting seats in spots with very bright sunshine, deep shade or strong wind.
- Add a covered area to provide shade from the sun or cover from the rain.



Planning yearly activities

- Plan from season to season to keep up interest over the year. For example, seeds sown in spring will need tending and harvesting over the summer and autumn. In winter, you could hold indoor sessions, such as looking after houseplants or doing artwork with dried flowers and leaves.
- Use a calendar and link activities with events such as garden shows and harvest festivals.
- Prepare the tools and materials you will need well in advance.



05. The rising trend of community gardens in Ireland today

Community gardens are a growing trend in Ireland. They bring together people of different ages, cultures and backgrounds. Nowadays, many councils promote community gardens as a good way to tackle loneliness and improve the local area at the same time.

Setting up a community garden requires time, commitment and effort. But with support from your community and council, you can make it happen. There are grants, policies and insurance to consider, and you will need a series of meetings to agree decisions. It is a good idea to seek advice from already established community gardens.



06. Running garden days for older adults and people with dementia

Setting the date

Consider setting aside specific dates and times for dementia inclusive gardening to ensure the safety and comfort of your visitors.

This is already good practice at many gardens and garden centres. They set aside one or two mornings a week for people with dementia and their family members or carers. The visitors have a tour of the garden and an activity such as sowing seeds or potting up bulbs. There is time for a cup of tea, a chat about their memories of gardening in earlier days, and a chance to take photos to share and talk about later.

Before you begin

If you are planning outdoor activities for people who are living with dementia, you should check out these questions in advance.

- Do they have hearing or sight impairment?
- Are they able to grasp, lift and hold things?
- Are they left or right-handed?
- Do they have allergies, for example to nuts or hyacinth bulbs?

Who will accompany them? Make sure they will be coming with a family member, friend or carer who knows them well.



On the day

It is important to understand how a person with dementia is feeling on the day they visit the garden, as their mood and needs may vary from one time to another.

Tips on how to make the day a success

- Be patient, kind and reassuring. A warm welcome and a friendly smile can make all the difference.
- Prepare a comfortable place to sit, where they can look out on the garden.
- Consider which parts of the garden they will enjoy most. Will they want to sit and look, or join in with some garden work?
- You may enjoy an activity together, such as potting up seedlings or picking flowers for a vase.
- In poor weather, provide indoor activities such as floral art, houseplant care or potting up seedlings.
- Keep things as simple and relaxed as possible. Make statements rather than asking questions, as your visitors may find questions challenging.
- Some visitors may be overwhelmed by a change of environment, meeting different people, and having so many new sights, smells and sounds at once. Be patient and give them time to adjust.
- Some visitors may have a hearing or visual impairment, so look out for any challenges this could bring.

See section 7 for suggestions of garden days in practice.

Health & safety

All gardens have potential hazards. A garden activity will only be safe and therapeutic if you take a thoughtful and professional approach to health and safety measures. This means being aware of risks and making adaptations that remove or lessen them.

Safety is always most important. Think about:

- Trip hazards such as uneven paths.
- Security hazards such as open gates.
- Poisoning hazards, such as mistaking flowers for food.
- The need for clear signs - for example, to the toilets.
- Emergency procedures.
- Flowers may stir up strong memories - happy or sad.

Doing the activity matters more than the result. Aim for happy gardening rather than prize winning blooms.



Risk

Outdoor spaces change with the seasons. Risks for older or vulnerable people vary along with these changes. All the following things (and more) can cause difficulties:

- Strong sun
- Icy winds
- Mossy paths
- Overhanging branches
- Shiny surfaces
- Thorny plants
- Poisonous seeds
- Uneven ground
- Gaps in fences

Also, people with dementia may tend to put things in their mouth, especially colourful things like flowers. They may be afraid of wasps or large birds. Glass doors and mirrors can cause confusion, and so can a disorderly mix of objects, colours or noises.

Safety measures

- In any outdoor activity, it is essential that the person in charge makes a careful inspection of the area. You can use the checklist of hazards above to plan how to reduce the risks.
- When you decide it is safe for the activity to go ahead, you should tell family, supporters, carers or staff what will be happening, who will be there and for how long.
- Every detail must be planned in advance.
- Check or double-check (a) Access to toilets (b) Sun protection (c) Snacks (d) Extra blankets.
- Make sure there are clear rules on what to do in emergencies, such as choking or a fall, and that all staff and helpers know the procedures.

For more guidelines in planning suitable activities, see Useful Resources in Section 9.



07. Garden therapy in practice

Here are some suggestions for garden therapy in two different settings

A. Visit to a community garden or urban farm by a group of people, some with an early-stage dementia

Activity:

The group visits a community garden or urban farm to take part in gardening or other activities according to their interests and abilities. The visit is fully planned in advance. Each visitor is accompanied by a family member or carer, who is responsible for their needs.



How the goals of therapy are met

- Cognitive and intellectual: Keep up communication skills by interacting with others.
- Physical: Maintain physical stamina and strength through walking, bending and carrying lightweight items such as a trowel or basket.
- Psychological and emotional: Build self-esteem by helping to grow vegetables for the community.
- Sensory: By spending more time outdoors, they build tolerance to the outdoor environment - wind, rain, and hot or cold temperatures.
- Social: Chatting and working together in a garden can lead to wider interactions with other group members and staff, as well as family and carers.



B. Making bird feeders to increase interest in nature

Activity: Participants assemble bird feeders. This encourages creativity and connection with nature through watching the birds.

How the goals of therapy are met

- Cognitive and intellectual: Follow step-by-step directions and learn about local bird species and behaviours.
- Physical: Improve hand and finger skills through making the feeders and the bird food (for example, by spreading peanut butter or rolling pinecones in birdseed).
- Psychological and emotional: Caring for wildlife encourages a sense of responsibility and a connection with nature. They gain a sense of accomplishment, meaning and purpose. Watching birds brings joy and relaxation.
- Sensory: Become more aware of and responsive to sensory factors - the sight and sound of the birds and the smell and feel of the materials.
- Social: Work more independently with less instruction and communicate with others.



08. Garden therapy in residential care

This section will give ideas about how to use existing garden spaces, conservatories and polytunnels at residential care settings and nursing homes for garden and nature activities. It is important to remember that other activities like singing or reminiscing can also take place in the garden.

When planning a programme in a nursing home, plan ahead.

- Carry out a health and safety audit of the garden and remove old rusty items and rotting wood.
- Re-use old pots and window boxes for gardening projects. This can save money but remember to sterilise the pots and boxes first (diluted Milton works well).
- Calculate costs, and plan to repeat and recycle as much as possible.
- Consider the different needs of different groups of residents. Discuss with staff to see who is interested in leading nature activities.
- Plan seasonal activities ahead, both indoor and outdoor, and make a schedule.
- Gather materials for gardening, floral arranging and craft activities.
- Prepare activity folders for groups of about six people. Monitor the weather forecast.
- Ensure your managers support the idea of outdoor time for residents.
- Advertise garden time to residents, staff and families with colourful large-font posters.
- Use specially adapted tools and coloured pots. Choose plants that are likely to stir memories.
- End the activity with a song or two, a poem and an ice-cream or cup of tea.



09. Useful resources

Websites where you can get information about dementia and social prescribing include:

www.engagingdementia.ie

www.understandtogether.ie

www.alzheimer.ie

www.dementia.ie

www.allirelandsocialprescribing.ie

Flourishing, a series of videos about the blessings of nature for older people. You can find the videos on the Engaging Dementia YouTube channel -

www.youtube.com/@engagingdementia6309

Find out more about Joyce Fitzpatrick: www.inspiredbynature.ie

Find out about community gardens:

www.ahta.org (American Horticultural Therapy Association)

www.thrive.org.uk (UK-based charity focused on social and therapeutic horticulture)

www.trellisscotland.org.uk (the home of therapeutic horticulture in Scotland)

www.cgireland.org (Community Gardens Ireland)

Literature on therapeutic design and practice:

Dementia Green Care by Gareth Chalfont and Alex Walker

www.chalfontdesign.com/media/Dementia_Green_Care_Handbook.pdf

Horticultural Therapy Methods: Connecting People and Plants in Health Care, Human Services, and Therapeutic Programs, Edited By Rebecca L. Haller, Christine L. Capra





“ The glory of gardening:
hands in the dirt, head in the sun,
heart with nature.
To nurture a garden is to feed
not just the body, but the soul. ”

- Alfred Austin