

Why Nature is Important to Older People and People with Dementia

- So called 'green' nature or wilderness provides physiological benefits such as better sleep patterns, improved hormone balance, improvement in resting heart rate and diastolic blood pressure.
- Nature-based experiences were also found to be therapeutic, restorative or healing, contributing to the emotional, psychological and spiritual intangibles of well-being. Flowers in particular appear to stimulate emotions.
- Physical presence of nature is emotionally restoring, and experiencing or viewing 'natural' landscapes is preferred over man-made parks.
- Resting in a garden setting improves concentration, particularly for a weak or fragile person. Therapeutic benefits appear to be linked to a person's sensitivity to the space and feelings arising as a result.
- Exposure to natural light can positively affect the physiological systems in people with dementia resulting in improved sleep, mood and behaviour.
- Framed within the wellbeing and self-identity of many people is the home environment, including a significant component of the natural environments, such as windows, gardens, patios, views and walking routes. There are physical and psychological benefits of gardens and gardening for older people, not least of which are pleasure and enjoyment.
- The garden plays a role in home-making, particularly through daily routines and activities. Domestic spaces affect self-determination and sense of continuity and choice. Living spaces, including the garden, can reduce isolation.
- Use and enjoyment of the neighbourhood by people with dementia depends on legibility, distinctiveness, accessibility, comfort and safety. Also, a level of complexity and interest, including a social community, that a person can make connections to on a daily basis contributes to a life of quality.
- Not only can gardening and the physical garden space in which this occurs contribute to human well-being and mental health, but nature-based activities and natural places can be purposefully therapeutic, as evidenced in health geography, in social and therapeutic horticulture and in psychotherapy practice. As such, these spaces are considered 'therapeutic landscapes' and have a reputation for achieving physical, mental, and spiritual healing. Mechanisms include a sense of place, psychological rootedness, authentic versus unauthentic environments and tapping into the sensory experience.
- Experiences with community gardening have helped people with mental health needs to overcome social isolation and instability. Being outdoors helps relieve stress and tension, and satisfies the need to be alone and to be free. Trees, plants and animals are sought after for stress relief.
- Psychotherapeutic methods offer theoretical and practical means to explore, and reflect upon areas of consciousness hidden from our everyday awareness, and gardens and horticulture are becoming more widely used for this.
- Nature involvement is beneficial when accessed by a person independently and also in relationship with another person, in terms of maintaining a sense of place, psychological rootedness, sensory experience, stress relief, social inclusion and stability.
- There is evidence of social, psychological and health benefits for people with dementia from spending time outdoors, the healing power of nature, activities in the garden, animals, multi-sensory exercise, and the use of nature to explore memories. Benefits were evident in their interaction, initiation, concentration, and activity completion. (for original sources see Chalfont, 2006, pp. 56-58)

Chalfont, G. E. (2006). *Connection to Nature at the Building Edge: Towards a Therapeutic Architecture for Dementia Care Environments*. PhD Thesis. University of Sheffield.