



Good for the soul

Make your backyard a peaceful sanctuary for the wellbeing of you and your family

Words: Tara Graham

Work. Money. Anxiety. Sickness. Are you feeling your stress levels rise? Are you developing a frown? Has your mood changed? These words represent some of the more difficult things in life that we face every day.

Sunshine. Autumn leaves. Falling water. Scented flowers. Now do you feel yourself start to relax? Is the buzz in your head slowing down? Are your shoulders releasing their tension?

Isn't it amazing how something as simple as the elements of a garden can rapidly improve our mood and give us the inner strength to deal with the more difficult things in our day? Simply by taking those few moments out to regenerate and to heal, we feel we can get back up and face the world.

Gardens have been used as a tool for healing for centuries. From ancient herbal remedies to 19th century sanatoriums to modern-day health retreats, historically we have ventured into nature to heal. Today, the garden is again becoming an integral part of the way we live and cope with our busy lives.

Gardens distract us, relax us, engage our senses and stimulate our imaginations. Gardens aid in relieving our stress and lowering our pain. There are commonly two forms of gardens with healing properties: healing, sensory and meditation gardens; and horticultural therapy and therapeutic landscapes.





The healing garden

This can be described as a calming and peaceful garden setting where one can escape and emotionally regenerate. A place to meditate, to quietly chat or to just relax and get away from it all. By spending time in a healing garden, users are healed in a passive way, through sensing nature.

A sensory garden is a garden that stimulates all five senses — sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. The plants and materials in the garden are specifically chosen for their scent, texture, colour and edibility.

Meditation gardens are quite often linked to specific religions or spiritual practices. They can take on many different forms, but their primary purpose is to provide a beautiful and therapeutic place for relaxation, rejuvenation and meditation.

Horticulture as therapy

Therapeutic landscapes are very different from healing gardens in that they promote active healing. The garden setting is specifically designed for use by physiotherapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses

1. For a garden to have a healing effect use plants that appeal to the senses. Garden design by Boldsimplicity.

2. Vegetable gardens and kitchen gardens, such as this garden in a design by Pepo, have a healing quality.

3. Water in motion is a soothing element in any garden, whether it's a water feature or running creek bed.

4. A healing garden is designed to slow you down, which might mean the inclusion of gently winding pathways.



and so forth as a tool for specific courses of therapy. Individuals are healed by actively participating in garden activities.

Horticultural therapy is a recognised form of therapy that uses garden-related activities to heal social, cognitive, physical and psychological issues as well as enhance general health and quality of life.

So powerful are the healing elements of our natural world that universities and hospitals are now commissioning research to verify what we as a society have known for centuries. Roger Ulrich, a professor and director of the Center for Health Systems & Design at Texas A & M University in the US, found that viewing natural scenes fostered stress recovery by evoking positive feelings and reducing negative emotions, effectively holding attention and interest, and blocking or reducing stressful thoughts.

Because of research like Roger Ulrich's and many others, our healthcare system is again acknowledging nature as a tool for healing. Hospitals, rehabilitation centres, aged

care facilities and mental health centres are gradually incorporating the healing properties of nature back into their healthcare plans and the design of their hospitals and facilities.

Healing gardens, sensory gardens, green therapy spaces, children's gardens, mobility gardens and dementia-specific landscapes are but a few of the therapeutic landscapes making their way into our healthcare systems.

At the community level

The education sector is recognising the healing properties of nature. Schools are now integrating kitchen gardens and nutritional food programs into their curriculum. Children are engaging in garden-based activities that strengthen their physical, mental and social development and aid in reducing poor nutrition and obesity.

Local communities are also embracing the garden as a tool to bring people together, to break down social and cultural misconceptions, to decrease social isolation →

healing gardens

and to create better neighbourhoods. The community garden phenomenon is weaving its way through suburbs Australia-wide, leaving many a green thumb and more unified neighbourhood in its wake.

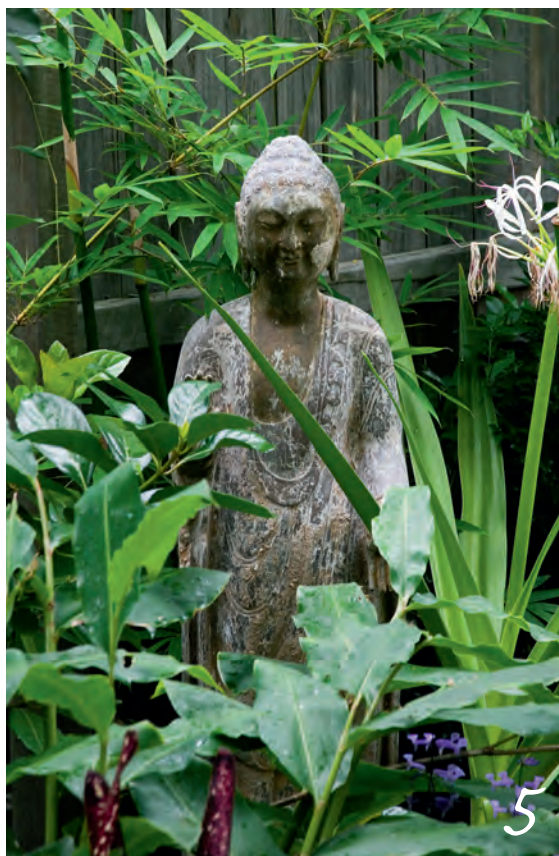
Interestingly, even our animal care organisations and zoos are acknowledging the psychological and physical benefits of gardens and sensory plants and their use in creating meaningful environments that engage and stimulate the animals they care for. Animals love to explore gardens with a variety of levels and heights, interactive sounds, new and interesting scents and to touch different ground textures. By incorporating interactive gardens into its care facilities, an animal's quality of life is significantly improved.

The healing properties of nature are also being embraced by veterinarians, with gardens being used as a form of therapy in which to rehabilitate and to lower stress and pain.

So how can we heal ourselves at home in our own gardens? The following design guidelines will help you to think beyond the idea of the traditional garden and towards developing your garden into one that can engage and heal you on a multitude of psychological and physical levels.

Creating garden rooms

Distinct areas in the garden provide opportunities to make choices, seek privacy and experience a sense of control. Often, when the world around us feels out of control, we seek spaces that offer sanctuary and are on our terms. By incorporating garden rooms into our gardens, places that offer a variety of activities, planting and seating options, we are



given choices, which helps us to feel we are again in control. Key elements to consider are:

- **Accessibility:** Paths leading throughout the garden let you explore and immerse yourself within it. Connect your indoor and outdoor living spaces by opening up windows or installing glass doors that allow you to bring the outdoors in. Have a variety of heights and levels in your garden so that, even when it becomes harder to kneel to prune, pot or pull out the weeds, there will be garden elements such as raised beds or pots at higher levels for you to engage with.
- **Garden seating:** There is nothing more enjoyable than being able to sit out in your garden on a sunny afternoon with a glass of wine or a cuppa, chatting with your friends or watching children play. Comfortable, well-placed outdoor furniture makes this possible.
- **Lighting:** We are all drawn into a garden that comes alive as the sun goes down. Make your garden a 24-hour adventure by the creative placement of lighting. Uplight your feature pots or trees for drama and ambience. Showcase the sensory wonder of falling water by putting lighting in your water feature or swimming pool. Create a sense of mystery by highlighting gateways and nooks beyond.

All-inclusive gardens

If you have children, grandchildren or even pets, welcome them into your garden by providing things that interest them. Children love funny sculptures, vegetable gardens and playing imaginative games created through the fascination of the garden. Your pets will love a garden that encourages them to explore. Sensory plants are wonderful for both kinds of little people. Scents, textures and colours sheds

5. Art in a garden is another way of slowing visitors down, encouraging them to stop, look and contemplate.

6. The Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide is one healthcare institution embracing the healing gardens concept.

7. Entice bird life into your garden with bird feeders, nesting boxes or birth baths. Birder feeder by Eva Solo.

8. Celebrate nature by including as many tactile elements as possible such as interesting natural stone features.

all engage both children and pets on a wide range of levels.

- **Engage with nature:** There is nothing more wonderful than sitting in the garden listening to the birds sing and watching the butterflies floating past. By incorporating bird feeders and bird baths, nesting boxes, fish ponds and nature-attracting plants, you will be blessed by the many beautiful creatures that will like to call your garden home.
- **Signal the seasons:** All life is cyclical. Each year, we experience the change of seasons. By

incorporating in your garden plants that blossom in the spring, give shade in the summer, have their leaves turn beautiful shades of red and orange in the autumn and sway in the wind and rain of the winter, you are constantly reminded that there is a bigger world beyond our own.

- **Shade and shelter:**

These two elements allow you to use it even when it's too sunny or it's pouring with rain. Potting

and greenhouses enable you to pot plants all year and to grow those plants that wouldn't normally survive in your climate. Shade sails, verandas, undercover outdoor areas and outdoor heaters all encourage us to be outdoors more often, reaping the healing benefits.

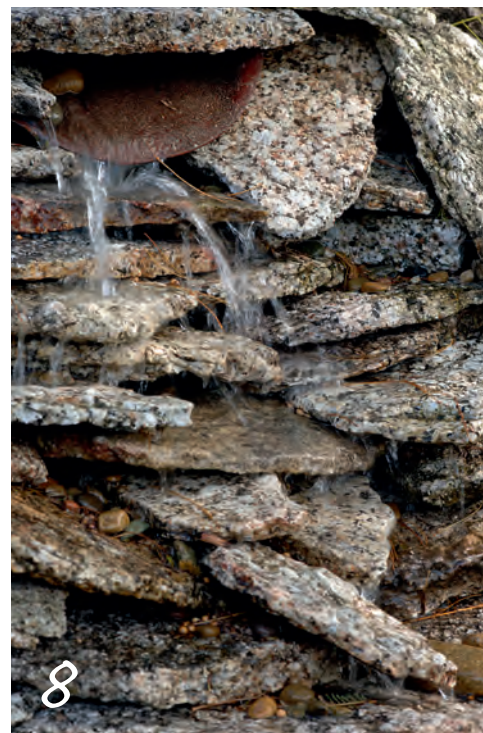
- **Stimulate your senses:** The choice of plants in your garden can have a profound effect on how it can heal you. Choose plants that stimulate your five senses — sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Incorporate elements of aromatherapy and colour therapy to deepen your garden experience.
- **It's your garden:** Bring elements of yourself and your family into the garden. Mosaic tiles, murals, mirrors, carved pavers and funny sculptures all add bits of ourselves to the garden.

Life rushes past us in fleeting moments. Healing gardens allow us to slow down and to stop for a moment to reflect and regenerate. By taking the time to enjoy watching birds feed, rain drip from the leaves and branches sway in the wind, we heal ourselves so tomorrow we can rise again and rejoin the rat race with smiles on our faces. ■

Tara Graham is principal landscape architect for OUTHOUSE Design, a Sydney-based landscape architecture consultancy specialising in designing healing, therapeutic and special-needs landscapes. This article was originally published in WellBeing Organic Garden.

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