

The Dementia Care Garden: innovation in design and practice

In the second of two articles, Garuth Chalfont gives practical advice on creating a Dementia Care Garden, and presents a case study showing how one care home improved and integrated three garden areas

This is the second of two articles on gardens designed for people with dementia. In part one I introduced a new agenda for outdoor dementia care environments: I did this after reflecting on the sensory garden, its popularity as a concept but its shortcomings in reality. I proposed the new Dementia Care Garden based on what research and practice say is beneficial for people with dementia in terms of recreation and therapeutic opportunities.

Such a garden makes possible a range of activities: from active to passive, from normal and domestic through to facilitated and therapeutic ones. I suggested basic principles and the design criteria for both the physical and social environment, and presented a checklist that addressed visual access, seating and microclimate, structures, furniture and fixtures, location, plants and planting areas, accessibility and social aspects.

When I meet with care home owners and managers to discuss their ideas and evaluate their gardens, some common issues tend to come up.

In this article I will begin by considering some of these issues – this may help your design process or save you some heartache and expense. After these tips, I will use a case study to demonstrate three newly-developed garden areas in a residential care home.

Tips for garden design

Forget the glossy magazine

What a garden looks like is only a part of its success: design your garden for practical use as much as for the aesthetic effect it will have. Magazine pictures are taken on warm sunny days. Think about enjoying the garden even in the rain. Pictures are often 'staged' for the camera. Have realistic expectations about how the space will be used.

Support relationships

Think about activities that can be shared with family and friends. Designing outdoor spaces to facilitate such activities will encourage social interaction and strengthen social ties.

Support daily routines

Be realistic about what people do routinely and optimistic about what they might enjoy doing. Design to support existing routines and to promote new ones.

Get the hard surfaces right first

Paving and structures are the most expensive part of a garden and getting them right is

essential. It may be worth spending most of your budget on this now, and waiting to add some of the plants and decorative features later. Creating a garden in phases not only gives people something to look forward to, but by extending the development process more people can give input and take ownership of the final result.

Are you sitting comfortably?

Create a pleasant microclimate where people sit. Install permanent seating that is available at any time, rather than needing staff to move furniture. Install vertical structures such as arches, arbours and trellis panels to support fragrant climbing vines and to provide shelter from the breeze.

Planting in pots

1. How to be water-wise

Rather than growing plants in pots that need constant watering, design plantings in flower borders or raised beds. This way plants can grow deeper roots and have more of a chance of surviving drought or neglect. Position plants away from the edge of the building so rain can reach them.

2. How to use compost

When potting up plants mix compost with soil – do not use compost on its own. Compost is only organic matter, unlike soil which supplies most of what plants need. It also does not retain moisture, so plants in compost will need to be watered daily.



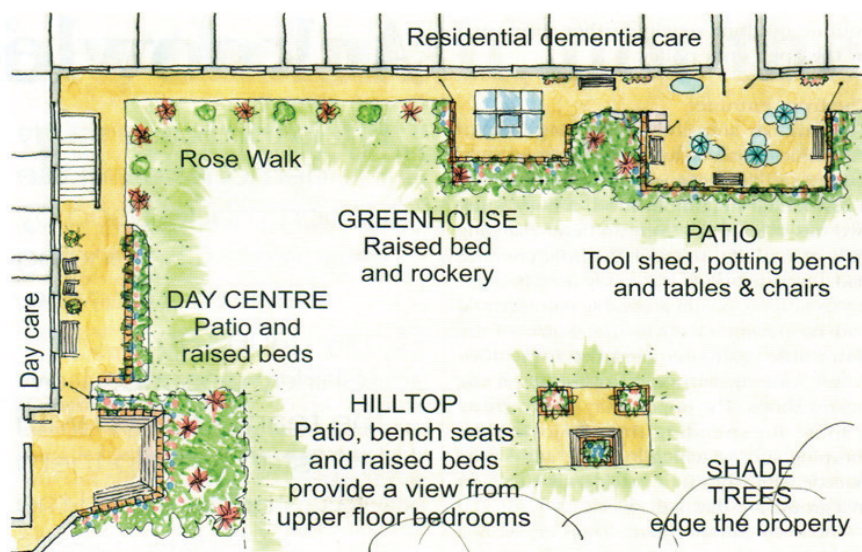
Garuth Chalfont is a landscape architect and director of Chalfont Design, which specialises in care environments for people with dementia.

Garuth Chalfont's book Design for nature in dementia care, a comprehensive guide to designing the physical and social environment both indoors and outdoors is published this month by Jessica Kingsley, London.



The front of the home before (above) and after (below) improvements.





Compost is also very lightweight, making pots easier to steal.

3. Types of pots to buy

Pots can be very decorative and add colour and interest in a garden. Rather than buying lots of small plastic pots that will need to be constantly watered, buy a few large heavy clay or stone pots. Position them where they can remain permanently and fill the bottom with gravel. Then add a mixture of ordinary garden soil, a few scoops of sand and no more than a third organic matter such as compost.

Because such a pot will hold a large amount of soil it will need less watering, roots will grow deeper, plants will grow larger and soil will evaporate more slowly. This will save you time and money in the long run.

If your pots are large and high enough, residents can participate in the planting, can lean on the edge of a pot to steady themselves, and can touch the plants without bending down.

Case study: a residential care home

The project at the 40-bed residential home called for an enhanced and refurbished landscape to increase the opportunities for resident, staff and family life outdoors. The project also involved maximising the overall site potential by improving and integrating all outdoor areas, in preparation for a move towards a total dementia care home.

Three main garden areas were developed: the patio, the day centre and the front entrance.



Above: the area before improvements. Below: the new patio extension with greenhouse and shed.



The patio

The project began by extending a patio to accommodate a greenhouse and rockery. The patio door is open daily leading to the seating area that accommodates individuals or small groups for a wide range of activities. It is a pleasant, warm, sheltered seating area for drinks and snacks, or just sitting and socialising near fragrant, flowering vines, hanging baskets, sweet peas, shrubs and the sound of birds. A care practice innovation within the home enabled residents to participate in normal domestic activities. The patio was an obvious place to hang out stockings and small items of clothing not far from the draining board indoors where they were scrubbed in a tub of hot soapy water. Meals are also enjoyed outdoors including old-fashioned fish and chips in newspaper.

The greenhouse extended the growing season, provided cucumbers and tomatoes to the kitchen and became an easy and interesting destination for short accompanied walks with a resident. To make the greenhouse accessible required cutting out the metal lip beneath the door so there was no impediment for people to walk straight inside. A tool shed was added near the potting table and greenhouse, and ample seating for gardeners and onlookers alike.

This patio space with the greenhouse extension is a good investment because it comfortably supports both active and passive engagement, the microclimate is conducive to spending time outdoors, the acoustics support good communication, and the practical necessities for gardening are in close proximity to each other, allow-



Photos and plan above: Garuth Chalfont

The patio space is a good investment because it comfortably supports both active and passive engagement in activities.



The new greenhouse, showing level access from patio.

ing a staff person to easily facilitate a group activity.

Spatially, the proximity of the physical elements creates a space that is big enough to allow movement and choice but intimate enough to keep people focused and engaged. With the additional functional space, a range of horticultural activities became possible in addition to the existing social ones.

The day centre

Outside the day centre is a small east-facing patio area surrounded by a brick retaining wall with a small amount of built-in seating. Over time the neighbouring trees have encroached, shading out the sunny growing area. Rather than prune the overhanging trees (an expensive, temporary and partial solution) it was decided to accept the shady area as a welcome respite on hot days and also extend the outdoor paved area. Clients would then have a larger total outdoor area, a choice of shady or sunny seating and more gardening possibilities. Both passive and active activities such as sitting, socialising or doing a bit of gardening could then be accommodated. The newly enhanced area would also be highly visible from the indoor lounge – further enticing people to use it.

The patio is connected by a walkway to the day centre garden. As part of the plans to turn the home into a total dementia care environment, the intention is for staff to encourage and support walking and physical activity for all residents, and to find ways that the physical layout of the building can support that. The pathway from day centre to the patio was identified as a potential outdoor link between different areas of the home, accessible to two groups of clients who regularly use the building. Having a stroll can be taken up by care staff, families and volunteers as a

routine outdoor activity further supported by the open door policy.

The front entrance

This outdoor area is the east-facing front of the home, adjacent to the function room, a lounge and the reception. The view is toward a residential neighbourhood, a busy road, two bus stops and a lively and ever-changing view of local life. Although the front entrance had a paved patio, it was rarely used because it was uneven, not an accessible entrance and had no perimeter enclosure. Some of the more able residents used the front door when walking with staff to and from the nearby shops. The opportunity was to create a space for spending time, enjoying the morning sun, watching local life and sitting outside with a drink or snack, individually or in a group, any day of the week.

The front entrance garden was envisioned as an enclosed area with a newly paved patio near the door, an area of lawn that is directly accessible from the pavement, as well as planting beds, arbours, seating and a trellis-style low fence with flowering and fragrant vines. The combined area was large enough to hold social functions such as a barbecue, with larger crowds overflowing onto the adjacent lawn in front of the home beyond the garden fence. Directly outside the garden is a horse chestnut tree where residents go to collect conkers.

Conclusion

The new garden areas feel welcoming, personal and domestic, both in scale and style. The design focuses on what people are able to experience in the garden and how easily they can use it. It supports active as well as passive activities, social as well as potentially therapeutic uses, and manages to engage the interest and imagination of residents, families, staff and managers alike. The new gardens not only make living in the home more pleasant, but they make coming to work a more enjoyable experience too.

Resources

Horticultural therapy: Thrive (www.thrive.org.uk), Cultivations (www.cultivations.co.uk), AHTA (www.ahta.org)
Activities provision: NAPA (www.napa-activities.net)
Design: www.chalfontdesign.com



Potting plants on the patio's potting table.