

Healing Gardens for Cancer Populations

By Lesley Fleming, HTR and Marcia Figueiredo

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Healing gardens for cancer populations: one size or style does not have to fit all. Mirroring the diversity of types and stages of cancer, these healing gardens each have their own blend of nature and health services translated and designed into hardscape, softscape, and aesthetic vibe. The commonality among them is the recognition of nature as a healing element.

Leah Diehl's categorization of healing gardens describes two branches: passive *restorative* gardens and active *enabling* gardens. Diehl describes restorative gardens as those that provide passive "experiences... focus[ing] on the requirements for mental restoration" (2013, p. 4). Enabling, or active, gardens specific for cancer populations may provide therapeutic and medical services such as horticultural therapy, creative arts therapy, acupuncture, and infusion treatments.

Therapeutic garden design and health goals can be interrelated. Therapeutic goals for those dealing with cancer often address increasing a sense of hope, renewal, and restoration. Therapeutic interventions can be both active and passive and it is helpful to note that "scheduled and programmed activities" (in both restorative and enabling gardens) are identified as an important characteristic of therapeutic gardens (American Horticultural Therapy Association [AHTA], 1995). Consequently, healing gardens can provide a two-fold function: the platform from which therapies and services are delivered as well as a place of physical sanctuary.

Understanding the physical and psychological impact of cancer is important for designing a healing garden. "Cancer or cancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery) may cause fatigue, dizziness, loss of strength and stamina, reduced mobility, and a sense of loss of control. These changes may only be temporary during treatment or may become permanent" (Sieradzki, 2013, p. 19). The psychosocial impact of cancer, equally significant, can include sense of loss, fear, reduced independence, social stigma, and labeling as a person with cancer.

What is compelling about healing gardens for cancer populations are the hybridized, innovative approaches garden designers have used for addressing the needs of people touched by the disease. They offer the garden as a means of improving physical, emotional, social, and psychological well-being. The following is a sampling of healing gardens specifically designed for people dealing with cancer, whether as patient, family, caregiver, or staff.

The Gathering Place: Norma's Healing Garden, Cleveland, Ohio

<http://www.touchedbycancer.org/about-us/take-a-tour/>



The Gathering Place Norma's Healing Garden Pool of Grass, Gathering Terrace and Portico. Photo: Virginia Burt, RLA, ASLA©

The Gathering Place "supports, educates and empowers individuals and families touched by cancer through programs and services free of charge" (The Gathering Place, 2013, para. 1). Norma's Healing Garden was designed by landscape architect Virginia Burt who designed garden rooms and chose garden elements to complement the comprehensive programming. The garden features provide a platform for such uses: raised beds for horticultural therapy in the Kitchen Garden; Pool of Grass for gentle exercise (yoga); Green Rooms with lush plantings for meditation and individual counseling sessions; sound/vibration therapy in the Children's Garden; interactive art therapy throughout the garden. The Gathering Terrace and Portico are outside space for support groups (Sister Circle - African American women, Grief Support Group for those with Advanced Cancer, Young Adults, Physicians with Cancer, and Caregivers to name a few). The Storybook Maze physically symbolizes transformation and the Secret Mystery Garden offers sanctuary space.

The Gathering Place's HTR Karen Kennedy identifies garden elements that can make a healing garden effective for cancer populations: shade, access to water preferably with disappearing in-ground heads, space flexible for both active and passive activities, adaptive gardening tools, multi-sensory plants, gently fragrant plants (due to olfactory sensitivity of some cancer patients), flexible (grouping of) seating, non-glare tables and water features with sound.

Cape Breton Cancer Centre Healing Garden, Sydney, Nova Scotia

Designed and built in 1999, the 1890 sq. ft. garden is adjacent to a treatment room on the main floor of the cancer centre in the hospital. Originally conceived as an outdoor infusion deck where cancer patients could receive treatment, it is now used as a public space for patients, visitors, and staff. Since 2012 a therapeutic horticulture (TH) pilot program has used the garden for its activities. Developed in conjunction with the medical social worker and oncology staff, therapeutic goals of the program include the following: increasing hope, bringing a sense of control, restoring cognitive attention, and increasing sense of empowerment through hands-on garden activities. The garden's features, which include multiple secluded sitting areas, shaded areas, soothing sounds from the water fountain, raised beds, containers, and easy access to facility and parking areas, provide both active enabling and passive restorative experiences for multi-users.



Cape Breton Cancer Centre's Healing Garden.
Photo: L. Fleming

Hope in Bloom, Dedham, Massachusetts

<http://www.hopeinbloom.org/>

Recognizing that cancer patients may prefer to heal at home due to compromised immune systems, mobility issues, reduced stamina, or sensitivity about changes in appearance, Hope in Bloom, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, installs flower



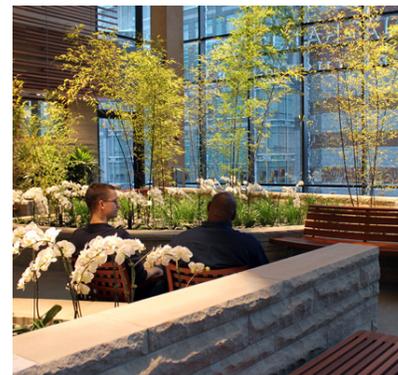
Residential shade garden installed by Hope in Bloom.
Photo: Roberta Dehman Hershon

or vegetable gardens free of charge. Since 2007, 118 gardens have been planted at the homes of Massachusetts residents (men and women) who are undergoing breast cancer treatment. Due to high demand and budget constraints, requests for new gardens have been suspended since August 2011. But gardens are still being planted with a revised strategy requesting volunteers contribute time and a seasonal \$100 participation fee. Individuals and groups are encouraged to assist with fundraising, for it costs between \$200-\$600 for indoor gardens; \$800-\$1,500 for patio gardens; and \$1,000-\$3,000 for in-ground gardens. This model of a therapeutic garden offers "benign and supportive elements" (Hazen, 2013, p. 3) which provides personal comfort and refuge as well as more frequent interactions with nature in the patient's home-setting.

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, Massachusetts

<http://eon.businesswire.com/multimedia/eon/20110113006518/en/2211109/Dana-Farber/cancer/new-clinical-building>

The Thea and James Stoneman Healing Garden is a two-story indoor sanctuary that envelops visitors and patients at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The building was designed with input from patients and families and includes an indoor restorative garden space featuring natural stone walls, seasonal flowers, a



Stoneman Healing Garden indoors at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.
Photo: Carol R. Johnson Associates, Inc.

canopy of greenery, and a peaceful area to reflect or meditate. Cancer patients benefit directly from views of the garden. The second-level Morse Conservatory, with strict infection control standards, offers a view of the garden in a plant-free environment for immunocompromised patients or those with allergies or other health issues. There are no scheduled programs or activities at this time in either the Stoneman Healing Garden or Morse Conservatory.

Cancer Lifeline's O'Brien Center Gardens, Seattle, Washington

http://larch.be.washington.edu/features/design_build/obrien/obrien.php

Three rooftop gardens, each with a distinct focus, are part of Cancer Lifeline's Dorothy O'Brien Center. The Earth and Sky Garden with its overhead sky opening is used for therapeutic sessions and ceremonies, and has space that can be reconfigured to accommodate groups of all sizes. The Asian-influenced Reflection Garden is designed for use by one or two people and offers privacy screens and rock and water garden elements appropriate for contemplation. The Celebration Garden, with input from a horticultural therapist, was planted with herbs as the basis for client and staff involvement. Designed and built in 1999 by University of Washington landscape architect students, the gardens seek to "restore a sense of order, safety and privacy for those dealing with the chaos induced by" cancer (Cancer Lifeline O'Brien Center, 2013, para.2). Programs, workshops and classes on relaxation, healing arts for creative expression, therapeutic horticulture, nutrition, and meditation are conducted at the rooftop gardens - all reflecting the therapeutic garden characteristic of "scheduled programming activity" (AHTA, 1995).

Contra Costa County Regional Medical Center, Martinez, California

<http://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com/article/contra-costa-regional-medical-center-ambulatory-care-center-martinez-ca>

Profiled in *Healthcare Design* magazine in 2012, Contra Costa County Regional Medical Center describes both garden and building space as “patient-friendly.” Likely influence to the design is Ulrich’s research that demonstrates the positive impact that views of nature can have on patient mood, duration of hospital stay, and medication (1984). Garden attributes include interior and exterior gardens, the use of porches, and glass-enclosed walkways - all of which provide views of nature. A private garden accessible from the ground-floor chemotherapy area provides an outdoor option for cancer treatment. “Accessibility,” one of the features of this cancer-treatment garden space, is an important therapeutic garden characteristic (AHTA, 1995).

The Virginia Thurston Healing Garden, Harvard, Massachusetts

<http://www.healinggarden.net/>

The 8-acre woodland setting and sensory garden (being installed in April 2013) provide a “profusion of plants for people-plant interactions” (AHTA, 1995) that are characteristic of therapeutic garden design. Services, therapies, psychosocial support, and education, including horticultural therapy which can be both restorative and enabling, are conducted indoors and out. They provide “scheduled and programmed activities” (AHTA, 1995) - a second characteristic of therapeutic gardens. Improving the quality of life, reducing anxiety, and managing stress are integral to the mission of the facility and its therapeutic goals which support people with cancer.



The Virginia Thurston Healing Garden facility offers a woodland setting. Photo: The Virginia Thurston Healing Garden

Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver, Colorado

In partnership with the Rocky Mountain Cancer Center, the Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) offers a therapeutic horticulture program centered around the DBG Bonsai Pavilion and Japanese Garden. Participants use nurturing and pruning of bonsai plants in the program called *The Cancer Journey as Reflected in the Japanese Art of Bonsai*. Many of the program activities occur indoors; however, walking through the botanic garden to the Bonsai Pavilion and the program’s plant-based activities makes the connection to nature immediate, active, and enabling.

Camp Dream Street, Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, Tenafly, New Jersey

<http://jccotp.org/category.aspx?catid=69>

A summer camp’s outdoor nature setting is the healing landscape for children with cancer and other blood disorders, ages 4-14. Camp Dream Street offers a week long camping experience which

includes horticultural therapy. Pat Czarnecki, HTR who delivers the program, identifies the therapeutic goals as developing new skills, building self-esteem and socialization skills, and promoting group cooperation. The Pearl Seiden Summer Program for Children with Cancer and Other Blood Disorders hosted 137 campers in 2012.



Camp Dream Street, NJ.
Photo: Camp Dream Street

Conclusion

The diversity of healing gardens for cancer populations is broad. It includes indoor and outdoor space, cultivated gardens, and natural environments. Healing gardens exist at hospitals, summer camps, human service facilities, patient’s homes, and botanic gardens. This trend is likely to grow given the recognition of the positive health impact that nature provides, especially during times of challenges to good health. Substantiated by evidenced-based research, post occupancy evaluations, and an emerging discipline of healthcare garden design, healing gardens for cancer and other populations offer multiple health benefits.

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