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## The Healing Power of Gardens and Landscapes

by Cheryl Corson, RLA, ASLA

It's been proven that being in nature or even looking at a garden through a hospital window is restorative. Our intuition would call this common sense. Scientific studies have shown reductions in blood pressure in patients whose rooms look out onto gardens versus those who look out onto, say, a brick wall. Gardens in or around therapeutic settings can also enhance and complement the healing process for patients' families and staff. This can be no less true of home gardens, even in the smallest of spaces.

We have heard the terms, "therapeutic gardens," "healing gardens," or "restorative gardens" used interchangeably. But there are shades of meaning and much to learn about how gardens and landscapes can be used as places of peace as well as places in which to engage in physical or mental rehabilitation. In America, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, first documented the positive effect that working in gardens had on people with mental illness. Since then the modality of horticultural therapy, or HT, has blossomed, helping people learn new skills or regain those that are lost. Today horticultural therapists work alongside physical and occupational therapists in many settings, with great results.

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) notes that therapeutic gardens employ what's called Universal Design, meaning that they are accessible for people with the widest range of conditions and "commonly stimulate the full range of senses including memory, hearing, touch, smell and sometimes taste" in addition to visual experience.

Not all therapeutic gardens must be professionally designed in order to serve as rehabilitative settings. And not all healing or restorative gardens must serve as clinical rehabilitative settings in order to improve a person's sense of well-being. But there is a lot of overlap.

### Therapeutic Garden Design Elements

We can take cues from the proliferation of therapeutic hospital gardens and incorporate certain design elements into our own public and

Even a small fountain can freshen the air and fill a garden with sound.





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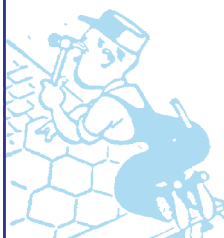
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private spaces, sometimes with little cost or disruption to what's already there. Here are some examples:

1. People who are working on balance or simply walking after an injury or stroke may benefit from subtle paving markers that note distance intervals. At Boston's new Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital Garden, where many Boston Marathon bombing victims are re-learning to walk, simple bands of contrasting pavers denote 10-foot intervals, and numbers are carved into stone for longer distances of a quarter mile, half mile, etc.
2. Simple leaning posts inconspicuously installed along walkways offer places to rest without having to sit and stand up again.
3. Changes in paving materials can help people become comfortable navigating slightly uneven surfaces.
4. Gentle changes in grade help people re-learn balance and build strength. If you injure an ankle or leg you become acutely aware of slopes that you formerly thought were flat.
5. Garden elements may serve double duty as hitching posts for stretchy bands used by physical therapists for various exercises.

### Healing Garden Design Elements

In addition to therapeutic functions there are other design considerations to be aware of in

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Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, Boston, Mass. Walking on different surfaces helps regain balance, and heavy stones mounted on poles help develop strength and manual dexterity.

creating a healing garden environment. Some of these are:

1. The Annapolis-based TKF Foundation suggests four elements of a healing space – a portal or clear marker showing the transition into a special space; a path helping focus one's mind on one's surroundings; a destination marking an end point on the journey through the garden; and a surround which encloses the area through plantings, fencing, or trees, providing a sense of safety and enclosure (see [www.naturesacred.org](http://www.naturesacred.org)).
2. Seating of various sizes and configurations accommodates small groups and private settings for individual reflection and inspiration. Seating can have a raised back or planter wall behind to provide privacy.
3. Shade from the hot summer sun is necessary in our area and, besides trees, can include pergolas, metal cutouts, or curtains, which can create beautiful patterns on the ground.
4. The sound of water, even in a simple recirculating fountain,
5. Raised planters or containers enable people to garden from a seated position.
6. Fragrant plants such as lavender, rosemary, and sage stimulate the senses, while others, like lamb's ears (*Stachys*) are soft to the touch.
7. Plants like the common garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) are hardy and attract lots of butterflies, which are wonderful reminders of the beauty of transformation.

Capitol Hill has many public spaces of all sizes (and jurisdictions). As we age, the notion of inter-generational playgrounds will increasingly incorporate these concepts. With the growth of Capitol Hill Village, advocacy for gentle design adjustments into our public spaces may occur more and more. Meanwhile consider these aspects of healing and therapeutic gardens for your own home spaces.

*Cheryl Corson, a licensed landscape architect in private practice, has served Capitol Hill since 1998. [www.cherylcorsan.com](http://www.cherylcorsan.com)*