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velvet*



The CHANGE OF PACE Issue

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GROWING PEOPLE

Whether seeking to improve physical or mental health, time in the garden is always well spent. Velvet's Melanie Taylor looks at social therapeutic horticulture and its capacity to help people grow

In her bestselling book, *The Well Gardened Mind*, Dr Sue Stuart-Smith – renowned psychotherapist and wife of garden designer Tom – describes how a garden gives you the physical space in which to clear your thoughts and create the mental space needed to work through your feelings. “Somehow the jangle of competing thoughts inside my head clears and settles as the weed bucket fills up,” she says. “Ideas that have been lying dormant come to the surface, and thoughts that are barely formed sometimes come together and unexpectedly take shape. At times like these, it feels as if alongside all the physical activity, I am also gardening my mind.”

Green Social Prescribing

Post Covid, in April 2021, NHS England launched a £5.77 million Green Social Prescribing Programme with local link workers attached to GP surgeries connecting patients to gardening and outdoor community activities to improve their mental and physical health and social skills to reduce loneliness. Today, the



The nature reserve at Snakehall Farm

Government's new 10-year plan for the NHS offers even more opportunities for people to reap the benefits of these nature-based interventions. Practitioners trained in social therapeutic horticulture work with plants and people using gardening and the garden itself to help people achieve their individual goals, learn new skills, make new friends, and increase their connection to nature.

The Prospects Trust

At 18 acres, Snakehall Farm sounds rather modest compared to larger farms, but this organic care farm and rewilded nature reserve in Reach, near Cambridge, is anything but. The HQ of local charity The Prospects Trust, this adapted and accessible smallholding delivers boundless opportunities to its 90 coworkers (people with additional needs, learning or physical disabilities and autism) who have been growing their skills, talents and green fingers since its inception in 1989. Snakehall's friendly staff are a unique mix of skilled agricultural, horticultural and social care professionals, experts who provide tailored support to individual coworkers and whose passion for what they do is infectious. Together they aren't just growing produce, they're growing people, friendship and community. Whether it's sowing seeds or pulling weeds, there's a job to suit the interests and abilities of everyone on the farm. Coworkers are empowered to drive the tractor and use tools in a safe environment, increasing their confidence and

independence. Here they've created a workplace culture where all feel valued and where everyone, including the coworker committee, has a say on how the farm is run and what they grow. In addition to real work placements on the farm, other coworker activities include being part of the Garden Team doing gardening jobs for residential and business customers, making deliveries, baking cakes in the Enterprise Kitchen and gaining retail and customer service skills working in their award-winning refill shop and café, Prospects Trust Unwrapped in Ely. Maz Baker, executive director of The Prospects Trust, says: "Snakehall Farm is a haven for all: we aim to swing open our farm gates to benefit everyone. From our coworkers to our customers, volunteers and even corporate volunteering work parties, our supportive staff team make everyone feel welcome, connected and part of our thriving growing enterprise. We harvest smiles – we say we grow differently and we care differently; we care for everybody, the environment and the planet."

The Prospects team sells organic produce and seasonal products made by their coworkers, like hanging baskets in the spring and logs turned into sparkly reindeer at Christmas. Every September I stumble out of the Soham Pumpkin Fair, my arms laden with a bountiful harvest of Snakehall's golden pumpkins, ready to fill the freezer with my favourite roasted pumpkin and spiced pear soup. Visitors can also pop down to their honesty veg shed on the farm to get their hands on the delicious produce.

See prospectstrust.org.uk

GreenMinds Therapy Garden

Over in Bury St Edmunds, an area of wasteland on the West Suffolk Hospital site



has been transformed into the GreenMinds Therapy Garden – a biodiverse sensory garden which offers a place of sanctuary and reflection, and a therapeutic gardening hub where trained practitioners support people with their mental health. The garden, which is located at Wedgwood House mental health hospital, opened in June 2024 and is the result of a £200,000 two-year fundraising project led by Katherine Falk, a clinician at Wedgwood House and Mossy Kennedy, an external volunteer. Patients at Wedgwood and members of the wider community can join a weekly volunteer gardening group or benefit from gardening workshops such as growing food, nutrition, healthy living, wildlife and sustainability. The thriving GreenMinds community works to boost the recovery process, combat social isolation and empower people with new skills and increased self-confidence.

See instagram.com/greenminds_therapy_garden

The Glasshouse Garden

Jo Thompson's gold medal-winning The Glasshouse Garden was one of my favourites at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Funded by Project Giving Back, the garden, which was centred around an elliptical, translucent pavilion by Hollaway Studio, celebrates the transformative work of The Glasshouse, a social enterprise offering horticultural training, employment and resettlement support to women at the end of their prison terms. The exuberant planting in this wonderfully romantic garden was comprised of gorgeous fragrant roses underplanted with phlox and other perennials in colours symbolising what Jo termed 'strong beauty'.

Jo chose the rich, jewel-coloured palette of vibrant reds and pinks, softened with peach and apricot tones, to represent the feminine resilience and strength of the women whose stories inspired her. The beautifully textured planting included *Rosa* 'Emma Bridgewater', 'Tuscany Superb' and the claret-hued 'Wild Rover', set off by the toning foxgloves *Digitalis purpurea* 'Sutton's Apricot', *Astrantia* 'Burgundy Manor' and *Geum* 'Mai Thai'. A mound of clipped purple beech *Fagus sylvatica* (Atropurpurea Group), and river birch and zelkova trees provided structure. Speaking about the garden, Jo says: "This garden is not just about beauty, it's about legacy. It's about hope and real change for women rebuilding their lives."

It was a return to Chelsea for The Glasshouse, having exhibited their Glasshouse Effect Houseplant Studio in 2024. Sponsored by Malvern Garden Buildings, that exhibit was a replica of the original glasshouse at the East Sutton Park women's prison in Kent where the initiative began. The houseplants were grown and nurtured by female prisoners and were densely displayed in such a way as to create a crescendo of greenery as you walked through the glasshouse, representing the progress made by both the women and the fledgling organisation. More than 30 women have been through the programme, with 100% of them being released into safe and stable housing at the end of their sentences, 100% entering employment or further training and a 0% reoffending rate.

It's often said that when we tend a garden, we are tending to ourselves. As autumn envelops us in its warm and gilded embrace, let's take a moment to appreciate the natural world around us. Not only for its ability to bring peace and calm into our busy world, but to be thankful too for its positive energy and transformative potential to reshape people's lives.

■ For help turning your own garden into a horticultural haven, contact Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or visiting hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk



The Glasshouse Garden
Picture: RHS Neil Hepworth