



An Introduction to Healing Gardens

Improving Quality of Life

How can healthcare institutions shorten recovery times, reduce doses of medication, moderate patient combativeness, increase visitation, and improve staff productivity? The answer is relatively simple. We have the power to improve quality of life for patients, staff, and visitors by creating an environment that is conducive to healing. Improving quality of life not only feels good, it directly relates to economic factors.

Understanding the Cause

For anyone working in, being a patient in, or visiting a hospital, the experience of overpowering and unpleasant fragrances, and stark, efficient environments (typically white walls and glaring tile floors) creates anxiety. These disturbances to visual and olfactory senses are compounded by the constant sound of beeping and other unpleasant noises. A daily regimen of this anxiety causes a racing heartbeat, pulsing blood, tensed muscles, and undigested food that exacerbates health problems.

Institutions are prone to treat these symptoms with medications instead of therapy and stress management. The healing garden is one method of ameliorating stress and allowing the body to heal itself by creating an opportunity to reconnect with nature.

A Powerful Ally

Gardens can help counteract the negative stimuli and stress we experience before, during, and after a hospital visit. According to Clare Cooper Marcus (a pioneer and expert in human-landscape relationships), the healing garden is “a variety of garden features that have in common a consistent tendency to foster restoration from stress and have other positive influences on patients, visitors, and staff or caregivers.” A healing garden stimulates the five senses, provides various spaces to accommodate human emotions, and ultimately ameliorates stress. Reduced stress can lead to heightened restoration, decreased doses of medication and an increase in productivity and efficiency.

The Research

A study conducted by Roger Ulrich of Texas A+M University showed that something as simple as a view of nature versus a view of a building’s brick wall produced amazing results. Patients with a view of nature had shorter postsurgical hospital stays, fewer

minor postsurgical complications such as persistent headache or nausea, and received far fewer negative evaluative comments in nurses’ notes. Patients with a brick wall view required far more injections of potent narcotic pain medications and received more negative comments from nurses’ notes (e.g. “patient is upset,” “needs much encouragement to do breathing exercises”) (Ulrich, 1984).

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In addition, Ulrich believes it is reasonable to expect that longer durations of exposure to nature in healthcare facilities could have comparatively persistent and perhaps larger restorative effects.

Setting the Stage

Typically, hospital new construction, additions, and renovations include the landscape as an add-on, separate from the whole. To create a successful healing environment certain requirements must be met.

The following is a list of 3 major requirements needed for the success of a healing garden:

Common Garden Features with Restorative Qualities

Clarity

Healing Garden design should be clear and inspiring, not ambiguous or unintelligibly abstract.

Access

The garden should be easily accessible. Codes and locks are obstacles and need to be reconsidered. A successful garden has simple and direct wayfinding in place.

Gathering Spaces

The garden must have open space for events and activities. Open space creates opportunity and encourages interaction and socialization with others.

Private/Intimate Spaces

Alongside gathering spaces, we need intimate spaces to escape, to mourn, to relax, to hold private conversations, and just to think.

Inspiration

Healing gardens engender a variety of responses from its users. Besides stress relief, users need inspiration and encouragement to accomplish goals and restore oneself. Sculpture, painting, and music can revitalize the spirit and make it stronger.

Connection to Nature

Modern society is awakening to the notion that immersion in the organic can put us in places no built environment can. The scent of a rose, the bright orange of a hibiscus, the sound of an oak's boughs in the wind, and the soothing ripple of a waterfall are natural stimulants and can be alternatives to pain medication and other methods that do not give the body a chance to heal itself first.

1. Include the Landscape Architect as a partner in the planning process. Access, circulation, and availability to the garden and surrounding landscape are paramount to its success.
2. Programs and events utilizing the garden create awareness and educate visitors in ways to use the garden. Designers can work with administration to encourage staff, patients, and visitors to utilize the garden and to realize its potential.
3. Understand the client and the needs of its users to ensure an outdoor space that accommodates everyone. Interviews, meetings, and interaction with existing conditions allow for a more complete and successful design.

Successful design of healing environments will yield restorative effects that can make the healthcare institution a competitive player in today's market with results that are hard to ignore.

Philosophy

Today the healing garden is considered an amenity, not a necessity. We believe the healing garden is a necessary component to the healing process in addition to medication and surgery. The healing garden is an essential part of an overall healing environment to reduce stress for patients, family and staff.



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