RHS

# RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Organisations and Communities

The RHS is the UK's gardening charity, helping people and plants to grow

# Contents



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# The RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint

The RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint inspires organisations and communities on a journey to a garden that's good for everyone.

Rooted in **seven guiding design principles** and shaped by **three core elements** that define a shared vision, it helps create welcoming green spaces that support emotional health and forge connection with nature in everyday life – a new chapter in a collective adventure in gardening where people and shared gardens thrive together.

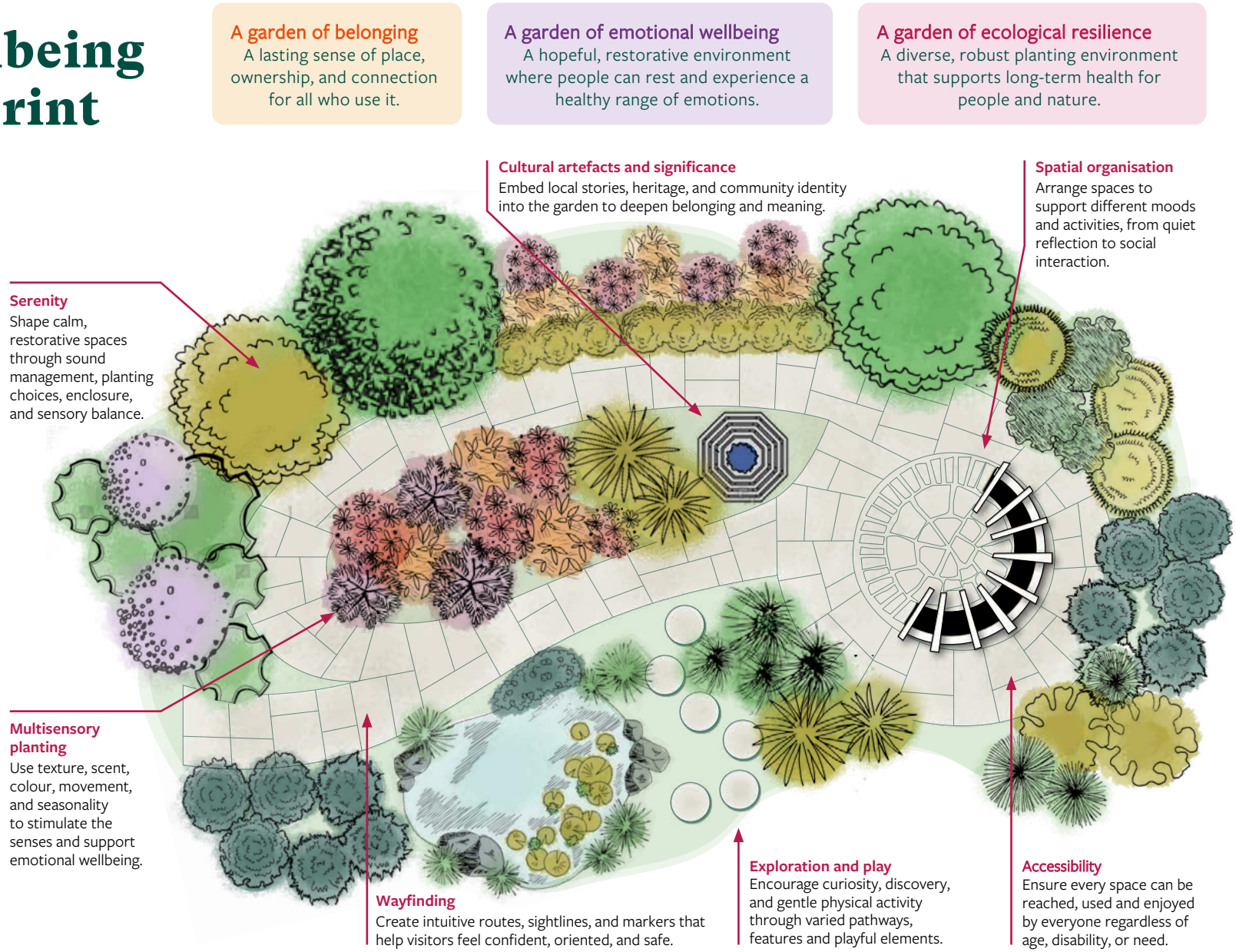



**FIGURE 1** The RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint: seven principles and three core elements guiding organisations and communities toward a garden that nurtures belonging, wellbeing, and ecological resilience.

# Introduction

A garden isn't just a place to grow plants; it's a place to support wellbeing.

Whether transforming a large hospital garden, creating a school growing space, or developing a shared community garden, these environments can offer peace, joy, and connection and become a lasting asset for the people and organisations that care for them.

With around **41 million people – 60%**[1] of the UK population gardening in some form, and community gardening now reaching an estimated 2.5 million people,[8,9] shared green spaces represent one of the most accessible and impactful ways to support wellbeing at scale.

The RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint draws on twelve years of research and practical experience to show how gardens and gardening can help people feel better, promoting good health, preventing ill health, and supporting recovery when it's needed most.

The evidence is clear: spending time gardening benefits physical health, mental wellbeing, and sense of connection with others and the natural world. To discover why gardens have such a powerful impact, explore the science that explains how and why they support better health and wellbeing.

The Blueprint distils the science into **three core elements** – what a wellbeing garden achieves – and **seven design principles** to help organisations and communities get there, whether starting from scratch or enhancing an existing space.

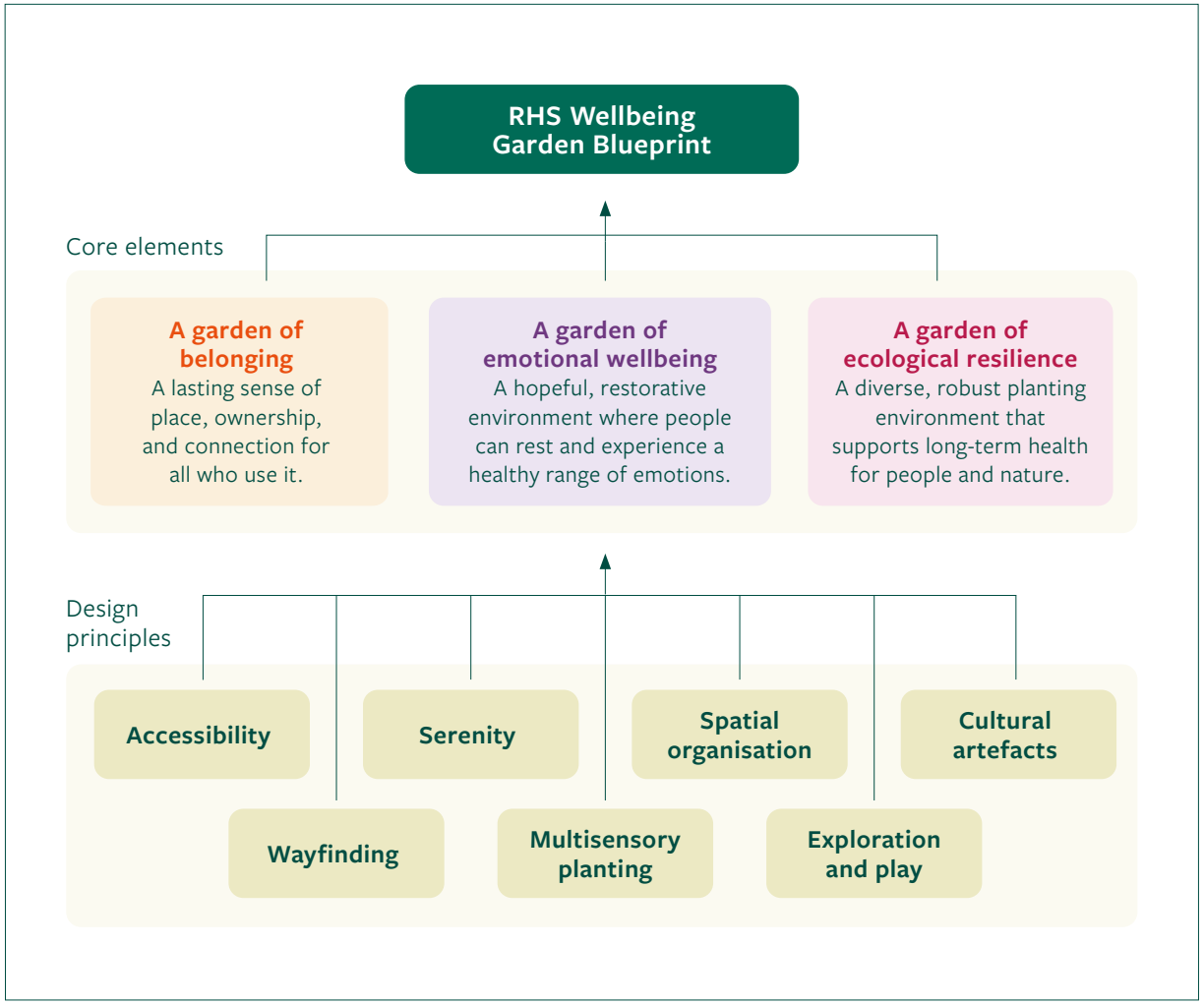



**FIGURE 2** The RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint: seven principles and three core elements guiding organisations and communities toward a garden that nurtures belonging, wellbeing, and ecological resilience.

# Designing wellbeing gardens together

A wellbeing garden has the greatest impact when it is shaped by the people who will use it. This section sets out a clear, flexible journey from the first conversations about purpose and users, through design and construction, to long-term care and adaptation.

## How this approach works

There's no single right way to create a wellbeing garden, but having a clear path helps. Two tools support the journey: a stepped process that guides the project from first idea to long-term care, and an inclusive design model that describes the different ways people can get involved along the way, from large hospital settings to small courtyards or school and community pocket gardens.

## Stepped process

Building on this combined approach, the stepped process provides a clear pathway for planning, designing, and managing a garden. Adapted from the RIBA Plan of Work, it sets out the key stages of a project and how they build on one another. Although the steps are shown in sequence, real projects often loop back or pause as new insights emerge.

A core garden group helps guide decisions throughout. This might include a project lead, designer, grounds representative, wellbeing or safeguarding lead, and a regular garden user.  Though in smaller projects, a handful of committed people can fulfil these roles between them.

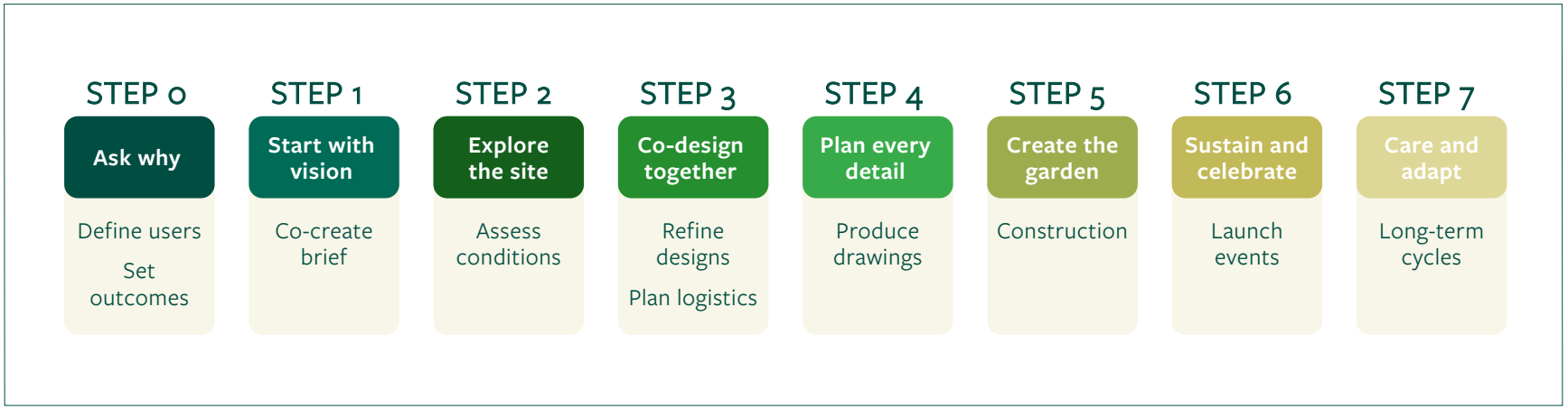



**FIGURE 3** The stepped process guiding when and how garden groups take part in the project.

## Step 0: Ask why

The garden group defines who the garden serves, names the partners, sets clear outcomes, and identifies site conditions, risks, and opportunities.

**Core elements:** welcoming, emotional wellbeing

**Inclusive approaches:** provision (identify garden users), consultation (gather initial input)

**Example:** A hospital identifies dementia patients, their carers, and staff as primary users. Initial conversations reveal that carers value spaces for private reflection as much as patients value sensory engagement.

## Step 1: Start with vision

Stakeholders co-create the project brief, aligning with the three core elements. The garden group defines scope and budget, builds governance, identifies funding, and assesses available strengths.

**Core elements:** All three

**Inclusive approaches:** consultation, engagement, co-production

**Example:** A school forms a garden group with teachers, pupils, parents, and a local wildlife trust officer. They agree on outcomes: outdoor learning, biodiversity, and a calm space for children who feel overwhelmed.

## Step 2: Explore the site

The garden group surveys site conditions (soil, sun and shade, drainage, existing vegetation), sketches concepts, tests ideas with garden users, and plans delivery in achievable phases.

**Core elements:** ecological resilience, emotional wellbeing

**Inclusive approaches:** engagement, co-design

**Example:** Community volunteers conduct a simple soil test and map shaded areas. A group walk reveals an unloved corner that residents want to transform into a wildlife pond.

## Step 3: Co-design together

Design committees form to refine the design, ensuring it embodies the agreed design principles. Partners coordinate, programming is embedded, and permissions are secured.

**Core elements:** All three

**Inclusive approaches:** engagement, co-design, co-production

This is the moment to finalise the design principles. The garden group documents what has been agreed (for example: all paths will be wheelchair-accessible; planting will prioritise scent and texture; there will be spaces for both solitude and group activity). These principles guide every decision from here forward.

**Example:** A housing association's garden group includes residents, housing officers, and a landscape architect. They agree that raised beds must be at wheelchair height and that a sheltered seating area is essential for older residents.

## Step 4: Plan every detail

For large budget and scale gardens technical drawings are produced. The garden group ensures compliance, develops implementation and maintenance plans, addresses safety, and appoints contractors.

**Core elements:** ecological resilience, welcoming

**Inclusive approaches:** engagement

**Example:** Technical drawings specify non-slip surfaces on paths and allergy-conscious planting near seating areas, translating the design principles into construction specifications.

## Step 5: Create the garden

Construction begins. The community is involved in planting. The transformation is documented. Milestones are celebrated. Ownership is built through participation.

**Core elements:** All three

**Inclusive approaches:** provision, co-design, co-production

**Example:** A community planting day brings together children, older residents, and local volunteers. Everyone plants something, creating personal connections to the space before it officially opens.


## Step 6: Sustain and celebrate

Lasting governance structures are established. The garden launches with joy. Activity programming begins. Community bonds strengthen. Impact is communicated.

**Core elements:** welcoming, emotional wellbeing

**Inclusive approaches:** provision, engagement, co-production

**Example:** A hospital garden launches with a ceremony where patients, staff, and funders plant a commemorative tree. Weekly gardening sessions and monthly wellbeing walks are scheduled from day one.

## Step 7: Care and adapt

Outcomes are evaluated. Partnerships are strengthened. Management adapts. Noticing nature practices continue. Learning is shared with wider networks.

**Core elements:** All three

**Inclusive approaches:** All approaches in ongoing cycles, with emphasis on engagement and co-production

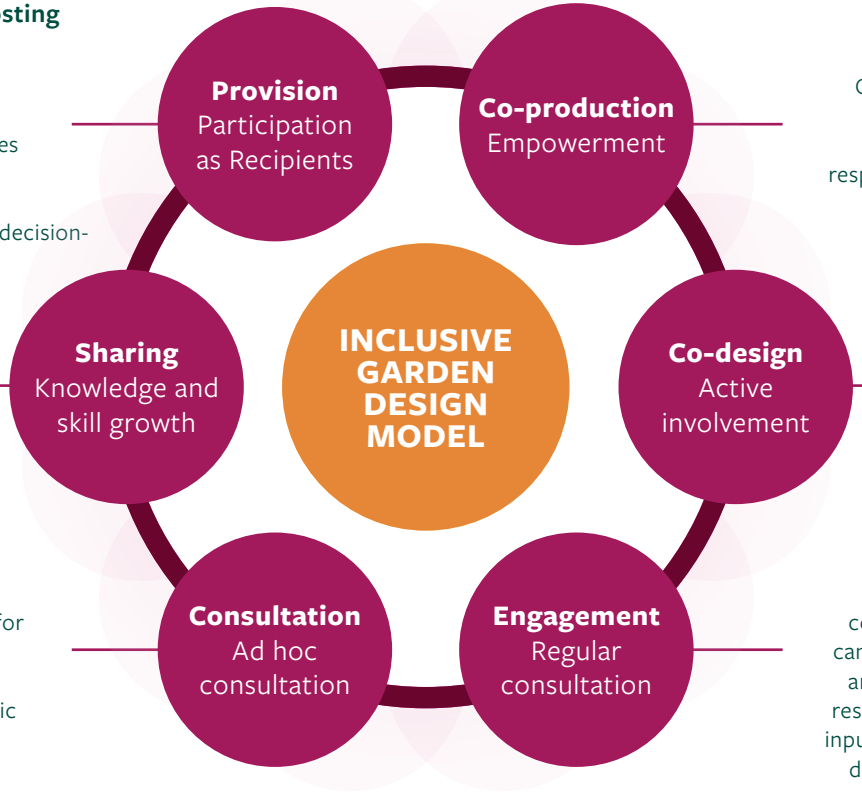
Design principles should be reviewed seasonally. What is working? What needs adjustment? A garden is never finished.

**Example:** After six months, feedback reveals the pond area is underused because seating faces away from it. The garden group repositions benches and adds interpretation panels about the wildlife living there.

## Inclusive garden design model

The Inclusive Garden Design Model 9 offers flexible approaches to involve the group and garden users. Unlike well-known participation ladders[86,87,88] which tend to rank certain approaches above others, this model treats all approaches as equally valuable, depending on community needs and project goals. Garden groups can move between them as circumstances change.

**Think about this in terms of the people or informal groups using the garden rather than the organisation hosting the garden.**




**Provision** Participation as Recipients

Garden users are invited to enjoy the garden or take part in events, activities and therapy sessions. People benefit from what the garden offers without being involved in planning, design or decision-making

**Co-production** Empowerment

Garden users and organisations work as equal partners. Informed by research, evidence and shared goals, they share responsibility, accountability and decision-making on the garden's development, programming and funding

**Sharing** Knowledge and skill growth

Garden users and organisations exchange knowledge, expertise and goals. Users share their practical experience and local knowledge, while organisations share research findings and technical expertise. This exchange helps shape how the garden develops and what it offers

**Co-design** Active involvement

Garden users actively work alongside organisations in garden design, construction and maintenance decisions. Informed by research, evidence and shared goals, their experiences and ideas directly shape and genuinely influence the garden's development, programming and funding

**Consultation** Ad hoc consultation

Garden users are occasionally asked for their thoughts and opinions through surveys, focus groups or interviews. This ad hoc input helps inform specific decisions about the garden

**Engagement** Regular consultation

Garden users are engaged in regular consultations to express their views that can influence garden design, construction and maintenance decisions. Informed by research, evidence and shared goals, their input consistently helps guide the garden's development, programming and funding

**FIGURE 4** Move between approaches to involving the group and garden users as the project evolves. Not sequential steps, but flexible approaches for organisations and communities to shape the design.

# Putting it into practice

The steps above provide a pathway; the following sections offer practical methods and tools to support garden groups along the way.

## Effective Engagement Methods

A range of participatory methods can support the inclusive approaches described above:

- **Consultation tools**
  Surveys, workshops, wish trees, and brainstorming sessions to gather diverse input
- **Inclusive participation**
  Noticing nature activities, drawing, model-making, or visual mapping for those with language, literacy, or communication barriers
- **Accessibility considerations**
  Addressing mobility, safety, lighting, wayfinding, and allergy-sensitive planting
- **Visual inspiration**
  Sharing images to spark ideas and help participants gauge preferences
- **Learning from others** Visiting nearby gardens to observe successful solutions

## Measure what matters

Capturing change builds support and guides continuous improvement. Measuring should begin before construction, this will be your baseline and continue through Step 7 and beyond. Even simple before-and-after records can reveal powerful changes.

Key areas to track:

- **Wellbeing outcomes**
  How the garden strengthens nature connection, inclusivity, and resilience. Consider quantitative tools such as the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale or an Outcome Star (pre and post garden).
- **Stories and lived experience**
  Interviews, case studies, personal reflections, and before-and-after photography.
- **Community transformation**
  Track changes in social connection and inclusion through attendance records, diversity of users, and regular feedback from participants, noting whether the garden is reaching those who need it most.
- **Skills development**
  Record training delivered, volunteer hours contributed, and new skills gained, through sign-in sheets, volunteer logs, or simple pre-and-post surveys with staff and participants.


- **Environmental sustainability** Biodiversity gains and sustainable practices. Progress can be tracked using RHS Grow or through campaigns like Bumbles on Blooms, Record wildlife on site or Pollinator count.
- **Staff and user wellbeing**
  Mental, physical, and social impacts (morale, sickness days, stress, burnout).
- **Financial sustainability**
  Return on investment, cost savings, and additional funding enabled by the garden.
- **Ongoing adaptation**
  Regular reflection and refinement of the garden's management and community involvement.

## Essential resources

Free platforms provide templates, tools, and community networks to support the journey:

- **RHS Community Gardening** Resources to help kick-start your group, promote your projects and connect with your community
- **Nature for health** Evaluation frameworks and guidance
- **RHS Campaign for School Gardening** Resources and inspiration

# Three core elements

What a wellbeing garden achieves – the vision

Drawing on the latest scientific evidence, gardens naturally support health, but their impact is strengthened through intentional design, thoughtful planting, and reflection. Drawing on scientific evidence, the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint outlines **three core elements** that define the vision for any wellbeing garden, supported by **seven design principles** that offer practical steps to achieve it.

These elements apply to every garden, regardless of size, context, or location, and all three should be considered throughout both design and creation to maximise wellbeing benefits.

**A garden of belonging**
A lasting sense of place, ownership, and connection for all who use it.

**A garden of emotional wellbeing**
A hopeful, restorative environment where people can rest and experience a healthy range of emotions.

**A garden of ecological resilience**
A diverse, robust planting environment that supports long-term health for people and nature.


## A garden of belonging

A lasting sense of place, ownership, and connection for all who use it.

A garden optimised for wellbeing fosters a strong sense of place, belonging, and ownership. Shared gardens can be tailored to reflect individual creativity, preferences, and specific needs – such as favourite plants, play areas, mobility considerations, or space limitations – encouraging frequent, enjoyable engagement with the garden.

A sense of place goes beyond design to include emotional and cultural meaning. Through familiar visual cues, sensory experiences, and personal elements like heirloom plants, seasonal displays, or spaces for family traditions, the garden becomes a meaningful extension of the of the organisation's environment and a site of memory, connection, and identity.

Designing for adaptability allows the garden to evolve over time. Flexible features such as moveable planters or modular elements help ensure the space remains relevant and engaging, becoming a living legacy that continues to offer joy, connection, and purpose throughout a lifetime of gardening.

**FAR LEFT** A window garden captures a personal space of belonging and everyday joy.
**LEFT** This heirloom plant captures the deep connection between plants, food, and the places we call home.

## A garden of emotional wellbeing

A hopeful, restorative environment where people can rest and experience a healthy range of emotions.

A garden optimised for wellbeing supports mental, physical, and social health by embracing the full range of human emotions. Rather than seeking constant happiness or calm, it encourages flourishing through acceptance, reflection, and growth.

Gardens can aid emotional regulation by offering spaces to grieve, celebrate, restore energy, or find calm. Seasonal plant interest, distinct garden 'rooms' for different moods, and sensory elements such as water features or birdsong help create perspective, reduce stress, and soften intrusive noise.

A wellbeing-focused garden also evolves across the life course, adapting to changing needs, physical and cognitive capacity, and emotional priorities, from childhood through older age, and across a range of disabilities and health conditions.

**TOP** A quiet moment in the garden becomes a hopeful place to rest and move gently through life's shifting emotions.
**RIGHT** Whether indoors or out, water becomes a natural focal point, adding movement and sound.

**ABOVE:** The RHS Resilient Garden, Tom Massey's design, supported by ACO, blends resilient harmony with thoughtful design, offering a calming, inspiring space.

## A garden of ecological resilience

A diverse, robust planting environment that supports long-term health for people and nature.

A garden optimised for wellbeing sits within a wider environmental context, recognising that human health is closely linked to climate and biodiversity resilience. Thoughtful planting – choosing the right plants for local climate, soil, sun, and ecological conditions – supports both environmental and personal wellbeing.

Designing with current and future climate conditions in mind, and using diverse planting, improves resilience to pests and extreme weather while providing sensory richness that benefits people and wildlife alike. Plants that support pollinators create opportunities for connection with nature, observation, and restoration, with RHS Award of Garden Merit plants offering a reliable starting point.

Sustainable practices such as composting, rainwater harvesting, peat-free compost, pesticide avoidance, and planting for wildlife reduce environmental impact while enhancing gardeners' sense of purpose, connection, and wellbeing.[23]

**ABOVE:** At RHS Hyde Hall, the Dry Garden showcases resilient planting that thrives in challenging conditions, creating a space where people and wildlife can connect, restore, and flourish.

# Seven Design Principles

Having defined the three core elements that shape the vision of a wellbeing garden, we now turn to the pathway for achieving them. Although gardens are known to enhance wellbeing, clear evidence-based design guidance has been limited.

To address this, the RHS and the University of Surrey conducted a global review of research,* supported by our own work in RHS and NHS wellbeing gardens.[56,57] We identified the design features with the strongest evidence for supporting wellbeing These aren't just good design practices – they're evidence-based pathways to achieving the three core elements of a wellbeing garden, regardless of size or budget.

## The pathway to achieving the vision

### 1 Accessibility

Ensure every space can be reached, used and enjoyed by everyone – regardless of age, disability, or need.

### 2 Wayfinding

Create intuitive routes, sightlines, and markers that help visitors feel confident, oriented, and safe.

### 3 Serenity

Shape calm, restorative spaces through sound management, planting choices, enclosure, and sensory balance.

### 4 Multisensory planting

Use texture, scent, colour, movement, and seasonality to stimulate the senses and support emotional wellbeing.

### 5 Spatial organisation

Arrange spaces to support different moods and activities, from quiet reflection to social interaction.

### 6 Exploration and play

Encourage curiosity, discovery, and gentle physical activity through varied pathways, features, and playful elements.

### 7 Cultural artefacts and significance

Embed local stories, heritage, and community identity into the garden to deepen belonging and meaning.

*Harries, B., Chalmin-Pui, L. S., Gatersleben, B., Griffiths, A., & Ratcliffe, E. (2023). 'Designing a wellbeing garden's systematic review of design recommendations. Design for health, 7(2), 180-201.

## 1 Accessibility

Gardens should be easy to find and access from indoors and around buildings, with clear, level pathways wide enough for two people and suitable for wheeled access. Designing for accessibility from the outset ensures the garden can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age, disability, or need.[84] Varied, comfortable seating in both sun and shade gives users choice in how they use the space.

An inclusive garden supports a range of activities and feels welcoming across backgrounds,[83] cultures and generations. Careful attention to lighting, planting, safe surfaces, and furniture can help build confidence for those less familiar with gardens or gardening. A space becomes restorative when it supports what people want or need to do.

Features such as smooth, non-glare surfaces, gentle gradients, raised beds, accessible seating, and clear routes between areas improve comfort and usability, helping create a garden that is functional, safe, and enjoyable for everyone to find and access.[85]

An environment becomes restorative if it is compatible with what an individual wants or needs to do.

## 2 Wayfinding

The pathways should link to all areas of the garden and provide a sense of direction and encourage exploration. Paving and layout should aid understanding and orientation of the different elements within the garden.

If the garden has pathways, these should be easy to navigate, curved to create different viewpoints, and invoke a sense of curiosity and surprise. Meandering pathways that link the whole garden together also remove the pressure of choice at an intersection, which is especially helpful for people with dementia.[7,68] Avoid creating dead ends, as they can be confusing or frustrating for people with varied mobility requirements, visual impairments, or cognitive support considerations.

Nooks, alcoves, pergolas, and layered plantings can create intimate spaces along the path.

## 3 Serenity

Peaceful garden spaces can be created through natural sounds such as flowing water, rustling grasses, and birdsong, supported by pollinator friendly and berry-producing plants. Quiet, green areas encourage reflection, relaxation, and escape from daily stresses, which many people actively seek in gardens.

The most relaxing patterns are those that are easiest for us to process visually and cognitively. Studies have shown that these are patterns with exact repetition (fractals) of mid-level complexity or Fibonacci type sequences.[32] Patterns on seedheads, tree branching, ferns, sunflowers and pinecones would have these optimal fractals. Research shows that people tend to react more positively to lush, green plants with rounded and denser foliage as opposed to narrow pointed leaves in a sparse canopy.[33]

Serenity is strengthened by gentle natural sounds, trickling water, grasses moving in the breeze. Natural soundscapes are more calming than traffic noise, which can reduce the restorative effect of birdsong[34] while simply perceiving biodiversity is calming.[35] Watching Garden birds, such as robins, dunnocks, greenfinches and blackbirds, can be especially restorative.[62] Planting to attract birds, or adding feeders, increases birdsong and supports this sense of calm.

**ABOVE** Soft, flowing grasses capture the calming patterns and sounds of nature, offer a moment of serenity, calm and reflection.
**OPPOSITE** Thoughtfully curved paths and clear junctions create a sense of flow and orientation, helping garden visitors move with confidence and curiosity.

## 4 Multisensory planting

Planting for diversity ensures year-round interest, resilience, and habitat for birds, butterflies, and other wildlife,[63] while stimulating the senses and reflecting natural cycles. Designs should avoid invasive, toxic, allergenic, or high-risk pest species.

With these principles in place, a wide plant palette is available, including thousands of RHS Award of Garden Merit plants. Using plants with varied colours,[64,65] textures, scents, shapes, and wildlife value creates rich multi-sensory experiences that can have an immediate positive effect on mood.

Scent plays a powerful role in wellbeing due to its direct link to emotion and memory.[66] Smell shapes emotional regulation, cognition, social interaction, stress, and symptoms of depression, so it is a key pathway through which nature supports wellbeing.[67,68] Research shows that fragrances such as rosemary, lavender, rose, bergamot, grapefruit, cedar, and cypress can help reduce stress and support emotional regulation.[69]

Maintaining sensory and vegetative diversity across the seasons is essential. Including evergreens, winter-flowering plants, berries, textured bark, and colourful stems ensures continued colour, structure, fragrance, and ecological value throughout the year.


## 5 Spatial organisation

Gardens can support wellbeing by offering spaces that feel calming or energising, open or secluded, adapting to changing emotions, life stages, and needs. Dividing the garden into areas using plants, structures, or changes in perspective helps support a healthy range of experiences.

Regardless of size, gardens can include distinct spaces for different purposes. Trees, shrubs, climbers, grasses, and hedging help define areas that balance openness with privacy and safety, including quiet corners for observation and reflection.

Wellbeing gardens should also provide spaces for social connection, with areas for gatherings of different sizes and a mix of sun and shade. Features such as outdoor tables, shelter, and shared notice boards[12,24] can encourage interaction, learning, and community building.

## 6 Exploration and play

A garden should have elements that inspire easy exploration. It can create a sense of play, joy and new discoveries about each other and the natural world. Stimulating all five senses as a means of discovery can be achieved through planting variety.

Include a diverse range of scented flowers or textured foliage and intentionally explore and experiment. Especially in a public garden setting, visitors may not realise that they are permitted to touch or sniff the plants. Some signage such as plant labels can foster deeper engagement and interaction.

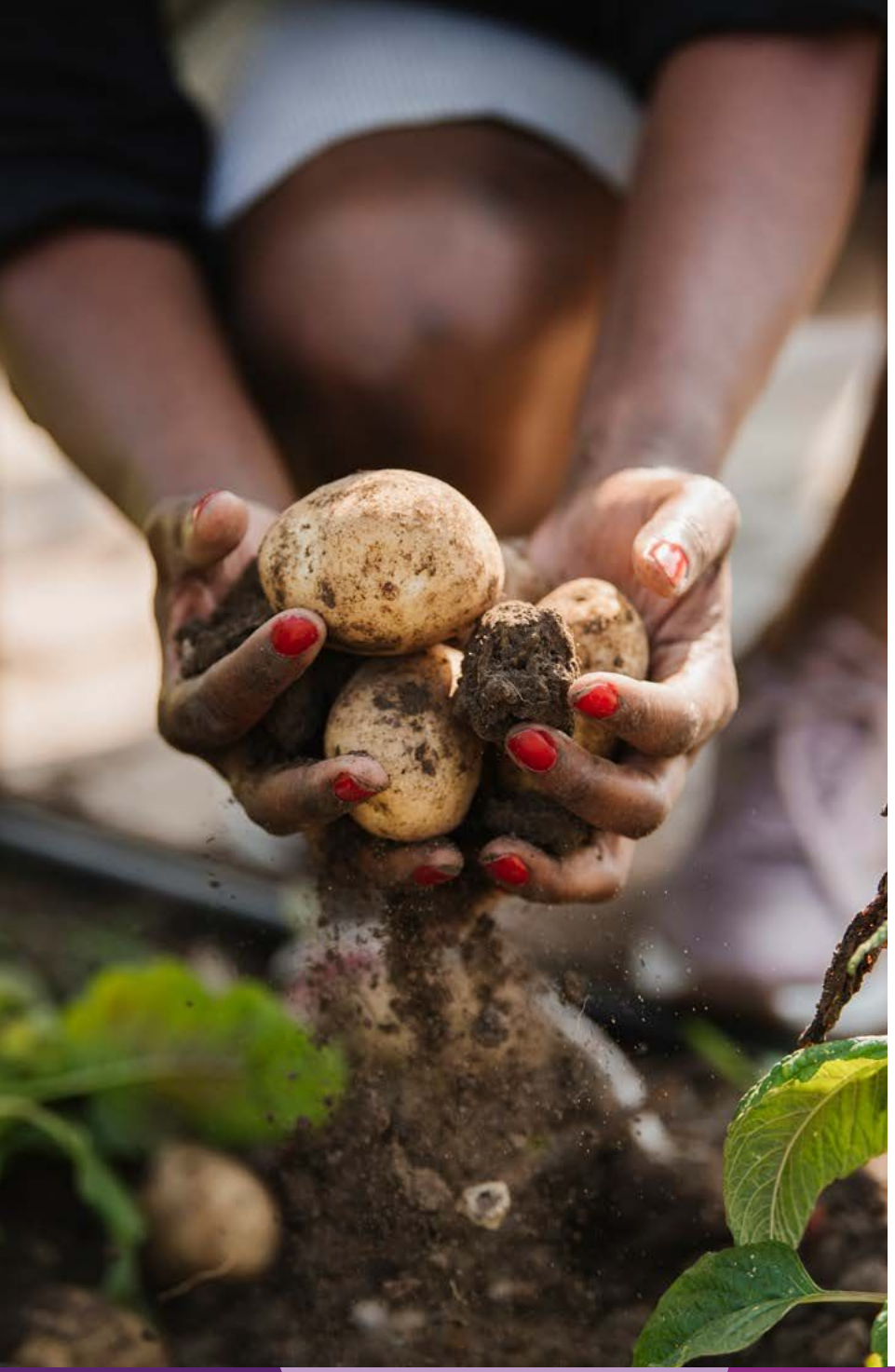
Ensure that the planting choices don't include toxic or allergenic plants if visitors will be encouraged to touch them and prioritise plants that are hardy enough to be regularly engaged with. Such interactivity and exploration will generate playfulness for both children and adults, which is likely to be uplifting and restful for the mind.


**TOP** A playground of scent, texture, and movement where adults and children explore freely and discover nature.
**ABOVE** Sensory plants invite visitors to explore through touch, scent, and curiosity.

## 7 Cultural artefacts and significance

A garden that embeds wellbeing in its design is itself embedded in its local culture and history. Including cultural artefacts and plants to match the individual or community who enjoys the garden can facilitate fascination, belonging, and a sense of safety or familiarity.

Celebrating local cultures can be subtle or immediately visible: inclusion of plants that are symbolic of the local community, with many plants themselves capable of evoking strong and usually positive memories. These might be gifts passed on to the next generation from loved ones, memorial trees, or plant displays reflecting the symbolism of the local community, your family, and your friends.




# Scientific evidence base

Private and shared gardens, even when not designed for wellbeing, are powerful assets for health.

Scientific evidence shows strong links between gardens and improved psychological wellbeing, reduced risk of mental illness, better stress regulation, stronger community connections, and higher self-esteem. Time in gardens can enhance our microbiomes, potentially lowering the risk of immune-related diseases. Few activities match the breadth of benefits offered by gardens and gardening – particularly their measurable impact on active lifestyles and mental wellbeing.

Gardening or simply being in a garden helps us stay active, connect with others, and immerse ourselves in nature's colours, scents, wildlife, and beauty. Quiet contemplation restores the mind, while gardens also provide food and remedies for minor ailments.

The evidence is clear: gardens and regular gardening deliver measurable physical, mental, and social health benefits.

## Key evidence for gardens and gardening and health

- Recent longitudinal UK Biobank studies[2,3,4,5] show that living near more gardens and green space lowers the risk of death from all causes, heart disease, and chronic respiratory illness, and may reduce obesity-related cancer risk.[6] Higher outdoor activity combined with greater residential greenspace is further linked to a lower risk of dementia and improved brain health markers.[7]
- Howarth et al. in 2020, in a meta-analysis of 77 studies, found that gardening can improve physiological markers linked to long-term health conditions, such as blood glucose, cortisol, and heart rate variability. They also reported positive effects on mental health and wellbeing, including reductions in depression and anxiety, with 36% of studies focused on mental health outcomes.[8]

- Soga et al., in 2017, in a meta-analysis of 22 studies, found that gardening significantly improves both physical and mental health. Benefits include reductions in BMI, depression, anxiety, and stress, alongside increases in physical activity, cognitive function, and overall quality of life with mental wellbeing showing the strongest gains.[9]
- Van den Berg et al., in 2015, in a systematic review of 40 studies, found strong evidence linking greater green space to reduced all-cause mortality. They also reported moderate evidence for an association with perceived general health.[10]
- Reyes-Riveros et al., in 2021 conducted a systematic review of 153 studies on green spaces and human health and wellbeing. They found that greater green space through number, vegetation cover, and size, improves all assessed health aspects, with the strongest benefits for mental health.[11]
- Chalmin-Pui et al., in 2021 found a significant positive association between more frequent gardening and physical activity levels of UK gardeners,[12] while de Bell et al in 2020 found that access to a private garden in the UK was associated with a higher likelihood of meeting physical activity guidelines.[13]

- Contact with soil and vegetation is associated with a higher diversity of microorganisms on the skin and in the gut, which improves immune system function.[53]
- During the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns, gardening was linked to better health.[28-49]
- Exposure to phytoncides, natural aromatics released by plants, are linked with human hormone regulation and anti-cancer properties.[87]

**The evidence supports**

- **Core element:** A garden of emotional wellbeing
- **Design principles:** Accessibility, Serenity, Multisensory planting

**ABOVE** Small planting moments bring calm and gently lift wellbeing.
**LEFT** At RHS Garden Wisley, moments in the allotments support wellbeing in powerful ways, lowering stress, lifting mood, and helping people feel more connected.

## Gardeners perceived wellbeing

A 2025 survey by the Royal Horticultural Society and YouGov provides clear evidence for the health benefits of gardening. When asked about the impact of caring for plants, gardeners overwhelmingly reported positive effects across all three dimensions of health[91] – with 77% saying gardening benefited their mental health, 76% their physical health, and 44% their social health. Crucially, those who are actively looking after plants tend to have higher self-reported wellbeing scores than those who do not, suggesting that regularly tending to plants has a meaningful impact on how good people feel about their lives.

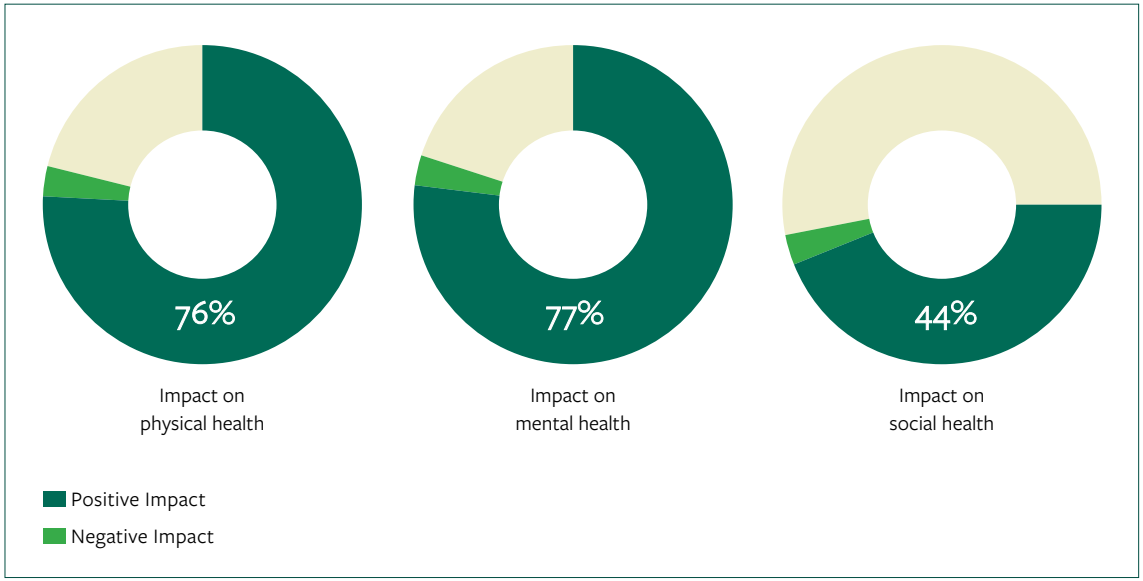



**FIGURE 5** Proportion of gardeners reporting a positive impact on their physical, mental, and social health, based on a 2025 RHS and YouGov survey.[a]

## Community gardening and wellbeing

The RHS Space to Grow Report 2025, developed with Morris Hargreaves McIntyre[89] and drawing on a national survey of over 2,000 community gardening groups, is the first research to map the scale and impact of community gardening in the UK. It reveals that an estimated 2.5 million people have gardened in their communities over the past three years, with 14.7 million more eager to participate.

The top three motivations for community gardening are bringing people together and improving physical and mental wellbeing – with gardens also serving as spaces for cultural exchange, intergenerational learning, and skill-building while addressing social isolation, supporting biodiversity, and making neighbourhoods greener and more connected (Figure 6).

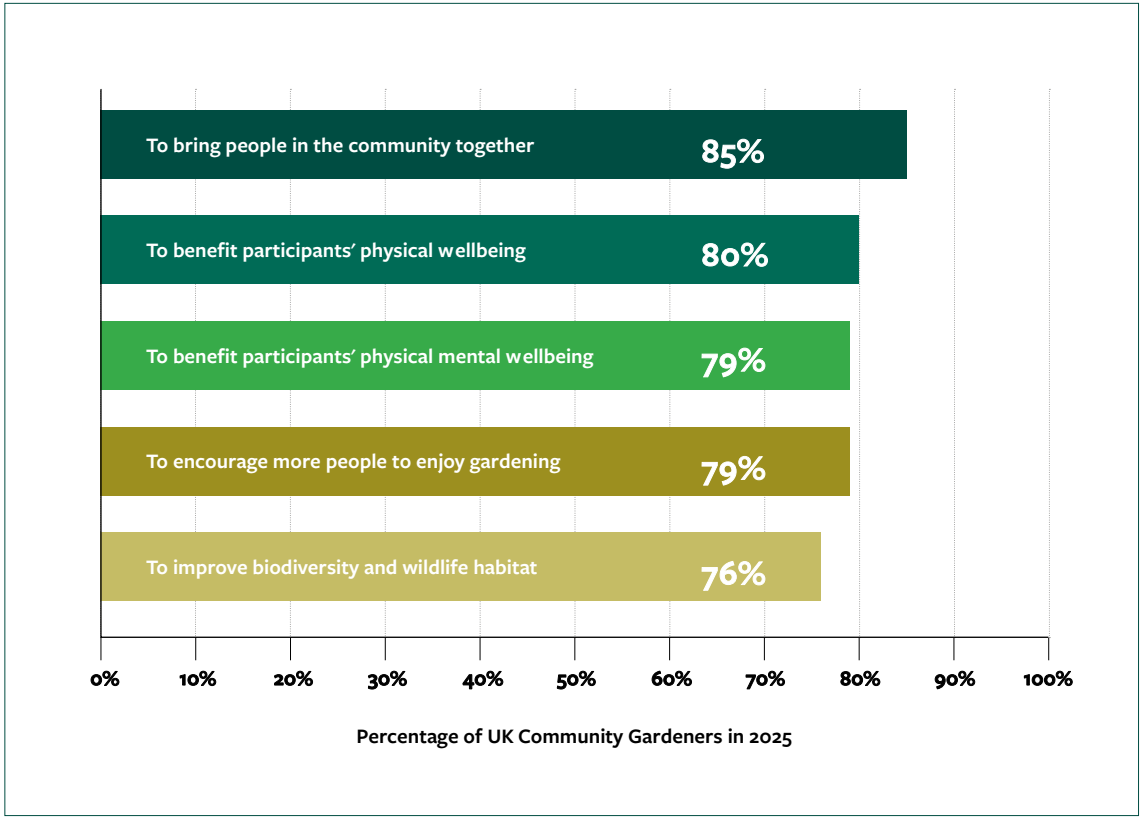



**FIGURE 6** Motivations for community gardening

## Hospital gardens and wellbeing

In 2024 the RHS commissioned Anna Cullum Associates and sam-culture to evaluate the University Hospital Lewisham Wellbeing Garden for its impact on staff.[90] Approximately 70% of the 128 surveyed University Hospital staff reported that the Garden improved their wellbeing. Around 81% noted a positive impact on workplace morale, providing essential respite from demanding hospital roles.

**The evidence supports**

- **Core Element:** A garden of belonging, a garden of emotional wellbeing, a garden of ecological resilience
- **Design principles:** Accessibility, wayfinding, serenity, multisensory planting, spatial organisation, exploration and play

**On a personal level, gardening can** be associated with:

- Reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety[9,15]
- Frequent positive emotions, similar to biking, walking and eating out[16,17]
- Feelings of joy[16,12]
- Higher life satisfaction and meaningful fulfilment[12,18,19,20]
- Sense of community[21,22]
- Self-esteem[23]
- Personal identity[21]
- Better connection with neighbours[12,24]
- Creativity[25]
- Forming positive habits around diet[26] and physical exercise.[27]

## Spending time in a garden

For those who do not garden themselves, it is also clear that **simply spending time in a garden also has health and wellbeing benefits**. For example:

- The presence of cultivated gardens and greenspaces has contributed to lower cardiovascular and respiratory disease mortality rates,[21] as well as lower risk of cancer.[6]
- A randomised controlled trial with 291 community gardeners found that community gardening increased fibre intake and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and reduced perceived stress and anxiety.[50]
- Higher levels of neighbourhood green space have been associated with lower perceived stress and healthier diurnal cortisol patterns. This suggests that access to green space can reduce physiological and psychological stress in deprived urban communities.[18]
- There is a consistent association between higher levels of green space during childhood and a lower risk of developing a psychiatric disorder later in life.[52] This protective effect of green space is apparent throughout all of childhood.
- The scoping review by Wendelboe-Nelson et al., in 2019 found that 70% of 273 studies reported a positive association between green space exposure and mental health or wellbeing.[14]

# Broadly, gardens and gardening grow plants and healthy minds, bodies and spirits

Shared gardens and gardening play a vital role in supporting health and wellbeing at both individual and community levels. Whether through active gardening or simply spending time in a garden, the benefits are wide-ranging - from improved mental health and reduced stress to stronger social connections and a greater sense of purpose. These positive effects aren't limited to large public green spaces; they can be experienced in private gardens, community plots, and even with a few plants in small front gardens or indoors.

Broadly, gardens and gardening grow plants and healthy minds, bodies and spirits through three key pathways:

1 **Reducing harm**
2 **Restoring capacities**
3 **Building capacities**

**The evidence supports**

- **Core element:** A garden of emotional wellbeing
- **Design principles:** Accessibility, serenity, multisensory planting

## Growing healthy minds, bodies and spirits

Pathways from garden exposure or gardening to improved long-term health.

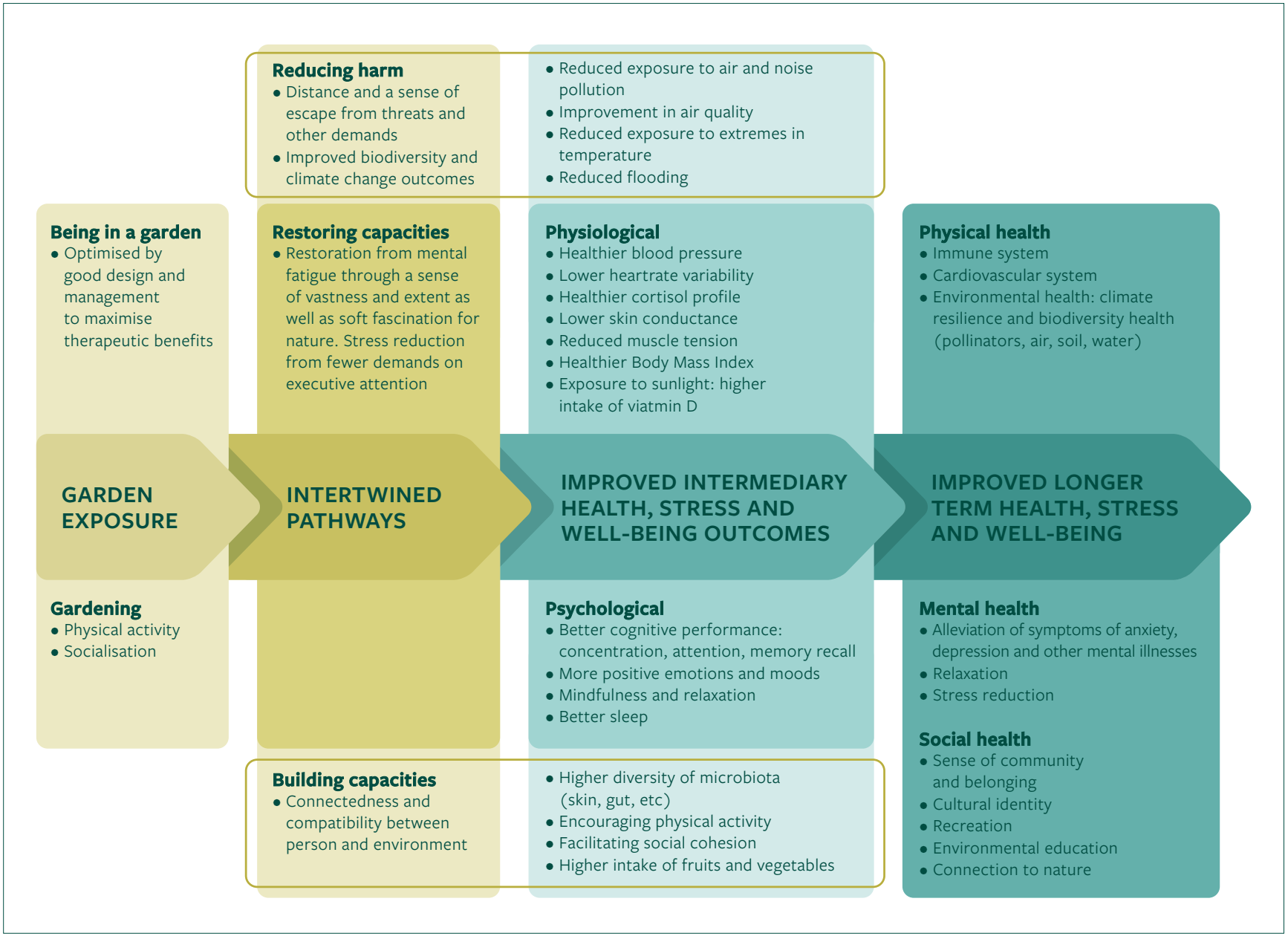



**FIGURE 7** *Pathways from garden exposure to improved longer term* ***health*** from Griffiths, A., Chlmin-Pui, L. and cameron, R. (2023). Cultivating urban habitats, a human species recovery action plan needs more than food and medicinal plant diversity to survive, Acta Horticulturae, 1374, 155-164, https://doi.org/10.17660/ActaHortic.2023.1374.20

# Noticing nature: enhancing wellbeing beyond design

Designing and developing a garden for wellbeing is only the beginning. How we engage with and notice nature within the gardening space can significantly amplify its wellbeing benefits. Research shows that actively paying attention to natural features – such as plants, wildlife, colours, scents, and sounds – enhances psychological restoration, reduces stress, and increases positive emotions.[73,74,75] Simply gardening or sitting in a garden without focused attention may offer some benefits, but structured noticing practices in your garden can also enhance wellbeing outcomes.[73]

## Why noticing nature matters

Attention Restoration Theory suggests that natural environments help recover mental fatigue by gently holding attention.[77] However, recent evidence also indicates that intentional noticing of sensory and emotional responses to nature can also deepen the restorative effect.[73,78] In experimental studies, participants prompted to notice natural features reported higher wellbeing and restoration compared to those who focused on built elements or received no prompts[73] Similarly, interventions encouraging daily nature noticing – such as pausing and observing beauty, listening to birdsong, or feeling textures – have been linked to sustained improvements in mood and nature connectedness.[74, 79]

## Practical activities to try out in your garden

Consider incorporating simple, mindful activities to strengthen connections with nature and boost wellbeing in the garden:

- **Pause and observe**
  Spend 10 - 20 minutes noticing three things you find beautiful in the garden and reflect on why they appeal to you.[74]
- **Sensory walk**
  Slowly walk through the garden focusing on colours, textures, and scents. Touch leaves, smell flowers, and notice contrasts in shape and form.[80]
- **Soundscape listening**
  Sit quietly and identify natural sounds – birdsong, rustling leaves, water features – and notice how they make you feel.[62]
- **Wildlife watching**
  Observe pollinators or birds for a few minutes. Watching wildlife can evoke fascination and joy, supporting emotional regulation.[81,82]
- **Nature journaling**
  Record observations and feelings after spending time in the garden. Reflective writing can reinforce positive emotions and mindfulness.[83]
- **Three good things in nature**
  Each day, note three positive aspects of nature you noticed in the garden. This simple practice has been shown to improve mood and wellbeing.[79]

These activities are low-cost, accessible, and adaptable to any garden size. They encourage sensory engagement and emotional reflection, both of which are key pathways to nature connection and wellbeing.[73,80]

**These activities can be adapted for different needs, disabilities, and sensory preferences.**

# Gardens are an asset

Gardens are not a “nice-to-have” they are a proven, preventative public health asset.

Gardens and gardening are low-cost, high impact ways to improve mental and physical health, support healthy ageing, and reduce inequalities. Evidence shows benefits for wellbeing, the economy, and community resilience, making investment in green spaces and therapeutic gardening a strong public health strategy.

## UK GARDENING LANDSCAPE

**41m** people garden in the UK

**1m** hectares of garden space

**4.6%** of Great Britain is gardens

**29-41%** of total urban built-up area is cultivated gardens

## ECONOMIC IMPACT – ENVIRONMENTAL HORTICULTURE

£38b UK GDP

*projected £51.2 billion by 2030*

**722,000** jobs supported

*projected 763,000 by 2030*

## HEALTH COSTS

**£117.9b** annual government cost of mental and social health

**£65b** annual government cost of obesity and physical health

The RHS State of Gardening Report (2025).

## MAJOR RESEARCH EVIDENCE

### Mental health

Gardens and gardening act as a **scalable mental health intervention.**

Soga et al. 2017; Howarth et al. 2020.

### Physical health

Gardens are a low-cost intervention that reduces major non-communicable disease risk and reduces inactivity.

**Gardening = moderate exercise, burning:**

~200 calories in 30 minutes → comparable to brisk walking, cycling, or yoga

Harvard Medical School, 2024

### Social health

Gardens and gardening reduces isolation and strengthens communities.

Sempik et al., 2014; Panțiru et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2025 ; Kuo et al., 2025

## LONGITUDINAL UK BIOBANK EVIDENCE

The UK Biobank is the world’s most comprehensive, large-scale prospective biomedical dataset, containing biological, lifestyle, and health records from 500,000 UK participants over time. This dataset shows that gardening can lower risks of dementia, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, mental illness, and metabolic disorders.

### 1 Dementia and Mental Ill-Health

Over ~10-12 years, cohort

**363,047** adults

**Greener environments had lower dementia, depression and anxiety incidence.**

Liu et al., 2024

### 2 Cardiovascular and Respiratory Mortality

Over ~8 years, cohort

**232,926** adults

**More private garden space had lower all-cause, cardiovascular and respiratory mortality.**

Roscoe et al., 2022

### 3 Cancer Prevention

Over ~10-12 years, cohort

**411,787** adults

**Those in greener neighbourhoods had lower total and lung cancer incidence.**

Liu et al., 2025

# Case studies

A wellbeing garden can be created in any setting, at any scale, and on any budget to achieve the three core elements of a wellbeing garden by applying any of the seven design principles of the Wellbeing Garden Blueprint. The case studies illustrate how the blueprint works in practice.

Explore more examples of wellbeing gardens in homes, communities, public spaces, and organisations, on our **website**.

**Core elements**

**A garden of belonging**
A lasting sense of place, ownership, and connection for all who use it.

**A garden of emotional wellbeing**
A hopeful, restorative environment where people can rest and experience a healthy range of emotions.

**A garden of ecological resilience**
A diverse, robust planting environment that supports long-term health for people and nature.

## 1 How a community garden revived a Welsh mining town

Forgeside RFC Community Garden
South West Wales £68,000 435m²

### DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED

**Accessibility**
Inclusive space for all residents, addressing limited garden access

**Multisensory Planting**
Fiery dahlias, *Heleniums* and sunflowers; pollinator-friendly

**Spatial Organisation**
Pizza oven dining area, outdoor classroom and rugby match seating

**Serenity**
Weathered materials that blend naturally with the landscape

**Cultural Artefacts**
Heritage-inspired design with steel and oak reflecting industrial past

## 2 Developing motor skills and confidence through inclusive gardening

Walled garden at Silverwood school
Wiltshire £500+ 400m²

### DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED

**Accessibility**
Wheelchair pathways, raised beds, edible arch-ways and ergonomic tools

**Multisensory Planting**
Sensory plants for touching, tasting and smelling; varied textures

**Spatial Organisation**
Distinct zones for learning, therapeutic activities and staff relaxation

**Exploration and Play**
Outdoor learning, thematic curriculum and hands-on activities

**Cultural Artefacts**
Value-based learning, farm shop connecting school to community

## 3 Rewilding Fairfield brings the community back to the grounds

Fairfield General Hospital gardens
Greater Manchester £56,500 9,174m²

### DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED

**Wayfinding**
Accessible paths linking bridleway; three distinct garden destinations

**Multisensory Planting**
Wild garlic, bluebells, bergenia; seasonal colour and scent

**Exploration and Play**
Education Garden with learning circles, mud kitchens and bug hotels

**Spatial Organisation**
Three gardens (Education, Peace, Bog) each with distinct purpose

**Serenity**
Peace Garden with reclaimed wood benches for quiet reflection

# 1 How a community garden revived a Welsh mining town

In Forgeside, where many residents have limited access to garden space, the transformation of a deprived patch of grass has brought biodiversity and strengthened the community.

## How the wellbeing garden began

Few residents in Forgeside, an old mining town in Blaenavon, Wales, have access to their own garden. In 2022, Forgeside Rugby Club successfully applied to an RHS campaign in partnership with BBC The One Show to transform a rubbish-strewn site into a plant-filled oasis that could enhance biodiversity and become a community meeting point for growing and cooking fresh produce.

### AT A GLANCE

**TYPE OF GARDEN**
RFC Community Garden

South West Wales

£ £68,000

435m²

**IMPLEMENTATION PHASE**
Three weeks in spring 2022

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED** Accessibility, multisensory planting, spatial organisation, serenity, cultural artefacts

**RIGHT** Flower beds and pizza oven in the Forgeside RFC Community Garden

## Budget and process

Inspired by Forgeside's heritage as a farming community turned Industrial Revolution centre, landscape architect Victoria Wade developed the site into a garden blending with the industrial landscape using weathered steel and oak. The £68,000 project includes a pizza oven and dining area, outdoor classroom for horticultural skills development, polytunnel and raised beds for the local food bank, and rusty steel planters filled with fiery dahlias, Heleniums and sunflowers reminiscent of blazing furnaces. Pollinator-friendly planting boosts local wildlife.

## Challenges and what went well

Building in three weeks was challenging, with landscapers working weekends to fabricate steel planters and meet deadlines. A shallow land drain required design adjustments. The garden exceeded expectations with unexpected high engagement, strengthened community bonds and improved wellbeing. Hard landscaping weathered beautifully, steel rusted and oak silvered, blending perfectly with the industrial setting. Local residents and the Rugby Club maintain the garden, fostering community ownership.

**TOP LEFT** The disused lawn near the rubgy pitch in Forgeside, before its renovation
**ABOVE LEFT** The opening of Forgeside RFC Community Garden in 2022
**ABOVE** Forgeside Rugby Club celebrate RHS Garden Day with award winning Landscape Architect Victoria Wade

## Impact of the wellbeing garden

The garden transformed the town, bringing people back to rugby matches and creating a catalyst for community connection. Mixed generations now meet for seeding, planting and cooking. 'This garden is now the beating heart of the community,' said Geraint Reynolds, Chair of Forgeside Rugby Club. Designer Victoria Wade was blown away by how the community has taken ownership and tends the garden with care.

**READ THE FULL JOURNEY ONLINE**

How a community garden revived a Welsh mining town

## AT A GLANCE

**TYPE OF GARDEN** Silverwood School

Wiltshire £ £500

400m²

**IMPLEMENTATION PHASE**
Started in 2015, ongoing

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED**
Accessibility, multisensory planting, spatial organisation, exploratory and play, cultural artefacts

# 2 Developing motor skills and confidence through inclusive gardening

A place where students with special needs can develop their motor skills, teamwork and self-confidence through inclusive gardening.

## How the wellbeing garden began

Silverwood special needs school (ages 4-19) ensur es growing spaces are accessible to all. The Rowde campus features a Victorian walled garden restored in 2015, with outdoor learning as a curriculum cornerstone. A 2020 merger expanded green infrastructure including woodland and polytunnels. The school no w welcomes pre-formal students with limited mobility, semi-formal students with learning challenges, and early-y ears curricula added in 2024. A farm with chick ens, sheep and pigs suppor ts therapeutic activities.

**ABOVE** The apple storage at the Rowde campus
**RIGHT** The garden is experienced in many ways, adapted to each class's needs

## Budget and process

New pathways, raised beds and edible archways improve wheelchair accessibility. Accessible tools like long-handled planters and ergonomic snips help students complete tasks independently. Sensory plants engage pupils: rhubarb for tasting, chillies of different heats, spiky plants for touch, rosemary for propagation, plus tomatoes, beans and herbs. Semi-formal pupils engage through play and exploration, while formal pupils undertake land-based studies qualifications. Younger students use literacy schemes; secondary students engage through value-based learning. Cost: £500 to start, £500 annually for maintenance.

**ABOVE** Chickens and sheep support therapeutic activities
**LEFT** The walled garden in Rowde has been used for outdoor learning since 2015

## Challenges and what went well

Managing the garden over summer holidays is challenging; volunteers help with weeding and animal care. Silverwood stores summer harvests in freezers for year-round enjoyment. Funding comes from selling plants, eggs and produce in the farm shop, plus summer and Christmas fairs. The Silverwood Charity Trust helps fund larger projects like greenhouse restoration and sensory garden creation.

## Impact of the wellbeing garden

'Many pupils don't have opportunities to explore outdoors away from school, so our wellbeing garden means a lot to them,' said Tim Melrose. Outdoor learning develops motor skills, teamwork and self-confidence. Sensory experience is critical for children with special needs to touch soil, feel weather, handle seeds and taste produce. Students seek out the garden to relax and self-regulate. Staff have dedicated break areas, and collaborations with mainstream schools and public volunteers connect the wider community to Silverwood.

**READ THE FULL JOURNEY ONLINE**

Developing motor skills and confidence through inclusive gardening

## 3 Rewilding Fairfield brings the community back to the grounds

A wellbeing garden was created to revitalise Fairfield General Hospital's green spaces, boosting biodiversity and community engagement through volunteering and education.

### How the wellbeing garden began

Fairfield sits in one of Bury's most deprived wards with limited green space access. Hospital leaders and NorthCare Charity recognised the potential of underutilised grounds to support staff wellbeing and community health. The RHS assisted throughout from consultation to design, coordination, build days and workshops.

Between April 2024-2025, Rewilding Fairfield transformed 9,174m² of neglect ed land into thriving green spaces. The collaborative project involved Northern Care Alliance NHS Foundation Trust, Nor thCare Charity, RHS, Lancashir e Wildlife Trust, local schools, nurseries and corporate partners.

**AT A GLANCE**

**TYPE OF GARDEN** Fairfield General Hospital

Greater Manchester £ £56,500 ☐ 9,174m²

**IMPLEMENTATION PHASE** April 2024 – April 2025

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES APPLIED** Wayfinding, serenity, multisensory planting, spatial organisation, exploration and play

Over 9,000² of neglected land has been planted in the grounds of Fairfield Hospital **LEFT** The education garden before and ABOVE The Peace Garden.

## Budget and process

Total cost: £56,500 (£40,000 Gr eater Manchester Green Spaces Fund, £15,000 NorthCare Charity, £1,500 RHS). In-kind contributions included 190 tr ees from NHS Forest and 60 herbs from City Build. In 2024, 93 v olunteer days were recorded; RHS staff contributed 100 days over two years. Thr ee gardens were created: the E ducation Garden connects to bridleway with learning circles, mud kitchens and bug hotels; the P eace Garden features wild garlic, bluebells and r eclaimed wood benches; the Bog Gar den manages water while enhancing biodiversity and serving as an outdoor classroom.

## Challenges and what went well

Limited experience managing wildlife-focused spaces became an opportunity to seek expert guidance. Working in an NHS environment required coordination with estates management and clinical operations. Strong communication across volunteers, schools and charities proved essential. Lancashire Wildlife Trust, The Conservation Volunteers and Touch Wood contributed expertise. Cross-sector collaboration amplified impact beyond
what any single organisation could achieve, demonstrating the value of long-term thinking and partnership.

## Impact of the wellbeing garden

'Rewilding Fairfield has brought the community back to the grounds,' said Catherine Wilkinson. Over 100 NHS staff participated in gardening activities; 90 corporate volunteers joined them. Ne w relationships formed with local organisations, ext ending reach beyond hospital gates. P artnerships with schools, nurseries and charities continue to strengthen. The pr oject was nominated for Green Initiative of the Year at Greater Manchester Health and Care Champion Awards 2025 and awar ded Level 4: Thriving at RHS It's Your Neighbourhood.

**ABOVE LEFT** Now, children from the local school regularly visit the Education Garden
**TOP** Bespoke bug hotels were crafted and installed to support pollinators

**READ THE FULL JOURNEY ONLINE**

Rewilding Fairfield brings the community back to the grounds

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# Key Organisations

From large national charities to specialist therapeutic horticulture networks, a range of UK organisations are shaping the landscape of community and wellbeing-focused gardening.

**The Eden Project** Cornwall supports nature recovery and social prescribing through nature-based activities to boost health, wellbeing, and learning. Their Nature Connections programme helps communities develop skills and confidence to take climate-positive action locally. They provide expertise, resources, and practical support to communities across the UK most affected by climate change and health inequalities, while promoting environmental education and advocacy for nature-based solutions to wellbeing and climate challenges. **edenproject.com**

The **Green Care Coalition** works to promote high-quality, cost-effective green care services that use nature-based activities to support health and social care. Their vision is for green care to be widely recognised and integrated as an effective option for improving wellbeing across health and social care systems. **greencarecoalition.org.uk**

The **National Garden Scheme (NGS)** opens thousands of private gardens across the UK to raise funds for nursing and health charities, donating millions annually to organizations like Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie, and Hospice UK. It also promotes the health benefits of gardens, funds therapy gardens and supports community projects.
**ngs.org.uk**

**The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS)** works with the NHS to create wellbeing gardens at hospitals such as University Hospital Lewisham, Colchester, St James's (Leeds), Woking, and Halstead, offering restorative green spaces for patients, staff, and visitors.
It also undertakes scientific research to better understand how gardens and gardening improve health and wellbeing, showing benefits like reduced stress, improved mood, and faster recovery.
**rhs.org.uk/advice/health-and-wellbeing**

**Social Farms and Gardens** is a UK-wide charity that supports communities to farm, garden, and grow together, promoting health, wellbeing, and environmental sustainability through nature-based activities. It provides resources, training, and advocacy for their extensive membership, including city farms, school farms, community gardens, community orchards and community allotment sites across the UK. **farmgarden.org.uk**

**Thrive** uses gardening to improve the lives of people with disabilities, ill health, or who are isolated or disadvantaged. They run social and therapeutic horticulture programmes, training for professionals, and develop gardening guides to help people improve their physical and mental wellbeing.
**thrive.org.uk**

**Trellis** is the therapeutic horticulture organisation in Scotland, supporting groups and practitioners to help people with defined or diagnosed needs to improve their physical and mental health, recover well-being, build confidence, and overcome isolation. Trellis' new practitioner qualification, 'Developing Professional Practice in Therapeutic Horticulture' a Professional Development Award, at SCQF level 7, recognised by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) will launch in autumn 2026. They founded the UK professional body for the sector, the Association for Social and Therapeutic Horticulture, (ASTH) focused on a register for practitioners, and are now working with Thrive to bring this to fruition. Trellis provides training, resources, networking, and on-site assistance to practitioners and aspiring start-up groups, while promoting research and advocacy for therapeutic horticulture. They have designed and built therapeutic gardens in several NHS hospitals and are providing therapeutic horticulture for patients with depression and anxiety at a GP practice in East Lothian - a pilot project they hope to take nationwide.
**trellisscotland.org.uk**

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