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USING NATURE AND GARDENS TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH – A VISIT TO ALNARP

An extraordinary experiment is taking place in the Gardens of the Swedish University of Agriculture at Alnarp. People suffering from a variety of stress-related disorders are referred by health services to a two hectares garden. The Goal: To learn to cope with stress and to understand what makes you “lose the grip” in daily life.

First, a short background. The Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden is a remarkable place. Since its establishment in 2002, they have treated more than 100 individuals suffering from stress, including people with Alzheimer's and people coming from Syria with diverse traumas. It has been carefully designed to meet several goals, continuously followed up by investigations. It is seamlessly designed for the needs of the participants, creating settings based on people-environmental research, and acknowledging the geographic and historical context. People aged 22 to 61 have come to the garden. All of them were highly ambitious, creative, and competent in their profession and then suffered psychological collapse due to stress that rendered them unable to work, sometimes for as long as 3-4 years. After a 12-week treatment program at Alnarp, as many as 70 % were able to go back to work. Results show that persons referred to the garden by insurance companies reduced their sick leave by as much 1/3.

The whole atmosphere and surroundings in the gardens breathe a sense of calmness and tranquility. One step into the garden is like entering another world. This experience is emphasized by a huge greenhouse with comfortable chairs, plants, and cozy blankets. A cat walks slowly by and the contrast of the warmth in the greenhouse and the cold outside give a sense of awareness of experience. You sit down, you are served with a hot cup of tea made from herbs from the garden and the smell immediately comforts, and you feel at ease.





The group starts every morning in the greenhouse with a 30-minute relaxation exercise and then chooses an activity for the day. This could be just exploring the garden on their own, choosing a place to sit, or trying a proposed exercise for the day. One of the first exercises, after getting to know each other in the group, is to make your own “time-out” resting pin. This is a wooden stick carved by each member and decorated individually.

After a 12-week treatment program at Alnarp, as many as 70% of beneficiaries were able to go back to work.

During the weeks in the garden, whenever a participant feels tired or that something is overwhelming, they go and look for their special place in the garden and put the “time-out” stick in the soil, letting everyone know that this pause should be respected as an important part of the working day and a clue to recovery.

Another exercise is making a clay form and finding a place in the garden to put it in. On a piece of paper besides each clay form, other participants write one word, and the person who made the form creates a simple poem from the words others left.



THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS OUR HEALING GARDENS

Here is an update on some of the activities that have taken place over the last few months at each of the partner's organisations.



PROGRESS AT INTRAS (VALLADOLID)

From the beginning of October, the INTRAS team has started preparing the ground for our Healing Garden by leveling the terrain. The working team members are two VET trainers in gardening -Andrés and Diego-, several employees of INTRAS' gardening services and trainees in our gardening VET course.

In parallel, we have started a Healing Gardener workshop with a group of seniors from the local community. This group will co-design the garden. In particular, they will participate in the selection and distribution of its plants. Over the next months, while the technical team will continue the work on overall design - paving and hard surfaces, furniture, pergola, etc.,- the seniors group will meet every week to make their own seedbeds to grow plants for our Healing Garden, under the leadership of Diego.



PROGRESS AT DIAKONIE KLINIK MOSBACH

The Berufsbildungswerk Mosbach-Heidelberg is working together with the Diakonie Klinik Mosbach to create the Healing Garden on the grounds of the Johannes Diakonie. Both the Berufsbildungswerk Mosbach-Heidelberg and the Diakonie Klinik Mosbach belong to the Johannes Diakonie.

Firstly, we had to decide where the Healing Garden would be, since there were several options for us. One option is upgrading an existing garden at the Diakonie Klinik Mosbach. Another option is a connecting staircase between the vocational training centre and the Diakonie Klinik that is being renovated, and which we are taking as an opportunity to design the areas as gardens on both sides of the staircase. In addition, a home for the elderly is currently being built near the Diakonie Klinik and the shell is already in place. For the next two years, we have plans to create a corresponding garden near the home for the elderly, which the elderly can use in a similar way that our Spanish partner is planning. In the vocational training centre, Mosbach-Heidelberg, there is a training department for horticulture or gardening and landscaping including greenhouses. We also want to create a garden near the greenhouses. We see the gardens mentioned above as a network that extends over the very large area of the Johannes Diakonie. In this way, people can find opportunities for utilisation or therapy, according to their individual needs, at different places on the Johannes Diakonie grounds.



PROGRESS AT THEOTOKOS FOUNDATION (ATHENS)

This October, the development of the Healing Garden began at Theotokos Foundation. Initial landscaping began on the area, which involved removing old plants, filling the pits with soil and levelling the surface. The Healing Gardening team consists of a group of ten trainees with developmental intellectual disabilities, two agricultural trainers and a psychologist - special education trainer. The team visited the site to carry out an onsite inspection, to analyse the project works and to identify the needs.



In the upcoming period, the technical team will continue working on the garden design, while the team of trainees will begin their weekly training schedule learning about healing gardens and contributing to the planning and development of our garden.



THE BEGINNING GARDENER QUIZ

Take our Gardening Quiz to see how much you already know about gardening:

1.It was very windy yesterday and the yard is full of leaves. To gather the leaves, we need:

- a.Pruning shears
- b.A rake
- c.A saw

2.In November we collect:

- a.Olives
- b.Chamomile
- c.Poppies

3.There are a lot of pine trees in the garden, so in the summer we need to gather the:

- a.Butterflies
- b.Pine needles
- c.Pebbles

4.In spring we collect:

- a.Chamomile
- b.Olives
- c.Broccoli

5.Lavender smells great and the colour of the flowers are:

- a.Red
- b.Purple
- c.Blue

6.Chamomile looks like a small:

- a.Rose
- b.Daisy
- c.Carnation

7.In summer we harvest a delicious, red vegetable called:

- a.Cabbage
- b.Lettuce
- c.Tomato

8.We harvest it, dry it and use it to prepare a hot drink:

- a.Pine cones
- b.Chamomile
- c.Figs

9.We make fig marmalade by collecting figs from:

- a.A tree
- b.The soil
- c.A pot plant

10.We transport soil with:

- a.Our hands
- b.A hoe
- c.A wheelbarrow

**Answers: 1b 2a 3b 4a 5b 6b 7b 8b 9a 10c*

**If you scored correct on 6 or more questions, you are on the right track to becoming a gardener.*

**If you scored below 6, you need to learn some more about plants and gardening tools*





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