

# Gardens: inclusive designs for care homes

Gardens are important features of a care home, particularly as some residents never leave its grounds. A conservatory can bring a garden into a care home for residents who stay indoors but it is pointless having a wonderful conservatory with nothing except a bare wall to look out on. It is important to have interesting features and foliage all year round.

## Care home gardens

A garden should be an integral, interesting part of a care home, no matter how small the area available (Swann, 2007a). Whatever the shape, an attractive garden can make a noticeable difference to the appearance of the home.

Care homes may have large gardens, yet contain features that require creative design and planting, such as sloping land or walls and trees that can darken the area. Even small shady gardens can be given a 'courtyard' look.

In built-up areas, homes may have very little frontage and a small rear garden. Some homes have small flower-beds around the base of the building but these often catch wind-blown debris and look neglected.

Lawns may be well-kept with foliage and features laid out in regimented rows; borders may contain a few specimen plants or be full of plants that are bursting with colour; gardens can welcome wild-life or look barren and austere. Some gardens are full of weeds and over-grown straggly plants, bushes and trees. Gardens create a positive or a negative impression.

Areas around 'new-build' care homes may resemble a building site, yet they are blank canvasses to be transformed exactly as the owner wishes. Well-designed and well-kept grounds can enhance the appearance of a care home and be a factor in it being short-listed or discounted.

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**Residents and visitors can enjoy outdoor living spaces whether they are in the garden or inside a care home. This article explores garden features and describes how to design well planned inclusive gardens.**

**'While plants are an essential part of any design, so too is the layout, which should take into account its paths, changes of level, seating areas, access points and storage facilities, which should all be assessed in relation to the house to create a unified garden layout'**  
Newstead (2009)

## Garden design

When a garden transformation is planned, residents' collective experiences of gardening should not be underestimated or undervalued. Residents should be involved in the design process by helping to choose focal points, the placement of seating and which plants to grow. Several designs may need to be considered until one emerges that has interesting features, is easy to negotiate and safe to be in. It is easier to make changes at the design stage than afterwards.

### Focal points

These can be achieved in several ways, such as using bubble fountains, plants with strong architectural features (see section on planting) and interesting foliage, or specimen plants against a contrasting background. The provision of nooks and crannies—such as a tree stumps and logs, or gaps in walls

and paving slabs—creates a valuable habitat for wildlife. Nectar-rich plants attract bees and butterflies. Bird tables, bird feeders, berry-rich plants and shrubs attract birds. Most gardeners underestimate the importance of water and its power to attract animals into the garden (Burkmar, 2003).

Water features, bird tables and sculptures can become overgrown by mature foliage and may need to be relocated.

### Sensory gardens

Although all gardens have visual impact and sensory stimulation, a section of the garden can be designed to stimulate a particular sense such as hearing, smell, touch, vision or taste. Waterfalls, bubble fountains, wind chimes and rustling plants can stimulate hearing. Fragranced plants should be used sparingly and planted in groups, otherwise there is no differentiation of smell and this can hinder orientation. Tactile areas should contain ornaments, grasses and textured leaves. A vegetable patch containing soft fruits will stimulate taste, and berry-bearing plants should be edible. Plants such as lavender and herbs stimulate touch, vision and smell. There are many examples of sensory gardens in books and on the internet.

### Themed gardens

A garden can have a focus or a theme. Gardens containing plants and items of yesteryear can evoke reminiscence. Old sinks, washtubs or washing mangles can be used and filled with or surrounded by flowers and shrubs, such as Daisies, Lavender, Honesty, Hollyhocks, Peonies, Dahlias, Bluebells, Iris, Lilies, Margaritas, Nasturtiums, Roses, Sunflowers, Sweet William, Pansies, Ivy and Privet hedges.

Homes may consider using a theme such as a country style, a Mediterranean or Japanese garden (*Figure 1*). The principle of 'less is more' is applicable in a garden as well as the interior of a home.

### Routes

Wayfinding is important and colour, scent-



Figure 1. Japanese style garden (Designed by Japanese Garden Society).



Figure 2. Seating at the front of care home.

ed beds and focal points aid orientation. Entrances and exits to the garden area, paths and surfaces, and gates should all be accessible as visitors may have mobility problems. Paths need maintaining, particularly along the edges, which should be well-defined and level with the path; otherwise they could be a trip hazard or a tipping hazard for a wheelchair. Paths with a drop to one side should have a brick or concrete upstand to prevent a wheelchair from tipping, and a handrail is needed at every change of level to assist ambulant people.

If paths are ramped, they should be wide enough (ideally 100cm) to accommodate a wheelchair or a walking frame. The ideal gradient is 1:60, and the maximum gradient should be 1:12 on a short path. Slip-resistant surfacing is advisable, and the provision of 'passing places' with seating at the top and bottom of the ramp.

Although ramps can assist wheelchair users, residents with walking difficulties due to restrictions of ankle movements or ankle instability may find shallow steps are easier to negotiate. Some homes can provide both means of access. Steps and thresholds at entrances can be eliminated by the provision of ramps and an ACO 'DoorWay' Drain to help to drain water.

Handrails should be provided adjacent to all steps.

### Overhangs

Window boxes, hanging baskets and outward-opening windows can be inadvertently knocked so they should not protrude onto a path. Planters and ornaments can be a trip hazard and may need to be recessed. Plants should be regularly pruned to ensure they do not encroach on the garden path.

### Seating

Ideally, seating should be located near the front of the home (Figure 2); preferably undercover, if the front door is locked at any time. Seating is essential near focal points or strategically placed on a long path. Shaded seating areas are useful, as some medication such as major tranquillisers, can increase skin sensitivity. Several residents may use wheelchairs, and space is needed to park a wheelchair (at least 90cm gap) alongside any seating or tables (Figure 3).

### Lighting

Paths and steps are generally lit up for security. Creative use of lighting extends the day and can highlight garden features not visible unless it is a cloudless moonlit

night. Lighting considerations include 'area lighting' to flood large areas; 'spot lighting' illuminates focal points such as water features, sculptural plants and trees; 'down- or up-lighting' adds texture or highlights garden features; 'mood lighting' creates atmosphere; 'moon lighting' gives the impression of a full moon lighting up the trees; 'shadow lighting' creates a shadow on a nearby wall or the ground; 'silhouette lighting' is placed behind an object to highlight features or 'water lighting' enables viewing aquatic life.

### Planting

The plants, shrubs and trees within a garden are, in many ways, dictated by the garden itself and should be grown in their ideal location. Some thrive in the sun, while others prefer the shade. Some like rich peaty soil, while others prefer sand; some are thirsty, while others prefer dry conditions. It is useful to take a walk around the locality to see what is grown in other gardens. Look at which items are in abundance, as although these are useful to fill a space quickly they may need regular pruning otherwise they will take over. Items like grasses, bamboo and mint can be difficult to control, as the roots spread quickly, and are best grown in containers.



Figure 3. Seating with room for a wheelchair.



Figure 4. Water feature.



Figure 5. Waterfalls.

Shrubs and trees should be thorn-less, and the right size for the area they are planted in, otherwise they will need to be moved. Ideas on easy-care plants are in Thrive's plant guide—see Further Information.

Full borders can provide different shapes and colours all year round. Evergreens, such as laurel, conifers and ivy, provide a green landscape throughout the year. Deciduous shrubs and trees lose their leaves in autumn and can be a fall hazard unless cleared up, but the yellow, oranges and reds provide an attractive view. Some have colourful bark and twisted 'architectural' branches that have interesting shapes, such as Corkscrew Hazel, Honeysuckle and Wisteria.

Small or town gardens often have walled



Figure 6. Hydrangea.



Figure 7. Chrysanthemums.

gardens. The area can be softened by planting climbing plants, such as Honeysuckle, Clematis and Wisteria in a tub with a trellis attached to the wall. Hanging baskets can be used as 'vertical spaces'.

### Garden safety

Many gardens are used as sitting areas and for activities. A garden should be safe and uncluttered to enable residents and visitors to negotiate it easily. A risk assessment should be carried out for residents who want to go outside unescorted.

Dangerous or long-handled tools should be stored away after use. Planters should not impede routes. Unattractive areas, such as compost heaps or refuse bins, can be screened by evergreen shrubs. This allows access while keeping the area from general view.

To prevent people who wander from leaving the grounds, it may be necessary to camouflage exits behind a screen of greenery; use keypads at exits. Horizontal rails should be avoided as these can be used as a ladder and planting against a fence can discourage people from getting too close to it.

### Ponds

Water features should be chosen with care as ponds can be fall risks, particularly if they are covered with green algae and misconstrued by a resident as a grassy area. A small raised pond, bubble fountains (Figure 4) or waterfalls (Figure 5) that disappear under a rock are safer and low maintenance, but still provide visual and auditory stimulation and will attract wildlife.

### 'Hazardous' plants

Many plants can cause adverse reactions if touched or eaten, and poisonous plants must be avoided. Symptoms range from skin and throat inflammation to dehydration, alteration of heart rate and coma, and are described in Swann (2007b).

Several websites (see Further Information) provide images and details of many plants that are poisonous, including Rhubarb leaves, Elderberry, Buttercups, Lupins and Hydrangea (Figure 6); or irritants such as Chrysanthemums (Figure 7), Giant Hogweed and Virginian Creeper.

### Sources of help and advice

A garden or landscape designer can design the garden and see the project through to completion. Some owners may want a 'design only' service. Care home staff may have design skills and the gardeners can put the plans into fruition. Family and friends can donate seeds and plants. There are plenty of sources of help to aid garden design.

#### 1. Books and magazines

Gardening books inspire and provide ideas ranging from themed gardens to ways to make gardening easier. These can be obtained from a library.

#### 2. Internet

Information is available on the internet, including designing gardens, sample plans, planting schemes with tips on maintaining plants. This can involve hours of searching as many pages contain advertising material. Useful sites can be stored in a 'Favourites'

folder. Gardens can be designed using software programmes. The BBC has a free on-line design tool called 'Virtual Garden' to help plan a garden, although the features available are limited.

### 3. Students and tutors

Local colleges, schools or universities may welcome the opportunity to have a live project, particularly those providing courses in horticultural (garden design and planting); construction trades (making features such as raised beds and trellises) or art and design (making garden features).

### 4. Local and national associations

National associations such as Thrive (see Further Information) or local gardening associations and volunteers can help to alter a garden area, providing information and physical help.

### 5. Local and national flower shows

Annual flower shows in Chelsea, Hampton Court, Southport and the RHS show in Knutsford, Cheshire can provide information and inspiration.

## Conclusion

A garden should be viewed as an 'all year round' feature that residents and visitors can enjoy from both outside and inside a care home. Well-planned gardens provide interesting views throughout the season, with an ever-changing scene. Gardens can attract wild-life such as birds, frogs, butterflies and dragonflies.

Autumn and winter are ideal times to think of positive changes that can be made to a care home garden. This can be viewed as a project running over several seasons that involves residents and the local community either in the planning or the practical aspects of reconstruction.

There is a considerable amount of information on planning gardens and this can easily be adapted to a care home. Gardens should be accessible for people with walking impairments, wheelchair users, and also cater for people with sensory or cognitive impairments.

The next article will discuss the benefits of gardening, and structures, techniques and tools that can help residents to take an active part in a garden. **NRC**

## Further information

Thrive's plant guide

<http://www.carryongardening.org.uk/plant-guide.aspx>

Poisonous plants

[http://www.realgardeners.co.uk/goodbadpois/poisonous\\_plants.htm](http://www.realgardeners.co.uk/goodbadpois/poisonous_plants.htm)

Irritant plants

[http://www.realgardeners.co.uk/goodbadpois/irritant\\_plants.htm](http://www.realgardeners.co.uk/goodbadpois/irritant_plants.htm)

<http://www.letsogardening.co.uk/GardenDesign.htm>

Garden design

BBC Gardening Information

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/design/>

Associations

Royal Horticultural Society (RHS)

80 Vincent Square

London

SW1P 2PE

Telephone 0845 260 5000

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/About/ContactUs/>

Thrive

The Geoffrey Udall Centre,

Beech Hill, Reading

RG7 2AT

Tel: 0118 988 5688

<http://www.thrive.org.uk/about-thrive.aspx>

Burkmar R (2003) *Principles of Designing Gardens for Wildlife*. Available online at [www.spacefornature.co.uk/default.asp?searchindex=none&ftr=wgprinciples&full=true](http://www.spacefornature.co.uk/default.asp?searchindex=none&ftr=wgprinciples&full=true)

Newstead M (2009) *A simple guide to garden planning: Choosing a style*. Available at: [www.rhs.org.uk/advice/design/design2.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/design/design2.asp)

Swann J I (2007a) *Turning gardens into multisensory experiences in promoting independence and activity in older people*. Quay Books, Wiltshire

Swann J I (2007b) *Table 5.2*. In: *Turning gardens into multisensory experiences in promoting independence and activity in older people*. Quay Books, Wiltshire

## KEY POINTS

- **A garden is an important feature of a care home and should be attractive and welcoming.**
- **Gardens should be safe areas for residents and visitors to enjoy.**
- **Focal points including sculptural plants, ornaments and water features can add interest and aid route-finding.**
- **Garden designs should incorporate features for all client groups.**