



How to create a therapeutic garden

There are 10 basic steps to creating a garden like the one at St Mary's, Lewisham.

1. Get advice

There's an old adage, 'If you don't know what you're talking about, ask someone who does'.

This applies to gardening as well as the rest of life. So, before you start digging, ask around. Are there any keen gardeners in your community who can advise on how to make the best of the patch of ground that you have to work with? Listen to their advice. Ask them to help formulate a plan.

Consider both the potential and the challenges of your site. Is it on a steep slope? Is it shady, or very sunny? What's the soil like? Is it easy to access? Does it have a good water supply?

2. What's your motivation?

Before developing any garden, whether at home or in the community, ask yourself the same question: what do you want to do out here? Your answer will drive the design that you go for, or, put less scarily, what you decide to do with the space.

So, if you want an area where families can play with their children, you'll be thinking about grass, meadow, seating and some trees to create shade.

If, on the other hand, you want to create a sanctuary for wildlife, you'll be considering keeping areas unkempt, creating log piles and putting up bird boxes.

At Lewisham, the motivation was to help people recover from mental health problems through gardening. This meant creating a series of beds that volunteers could help create and maintain. It also involved building raised beds for vegetables, so that those in wheelchairs could access them and join in the gardening.

The Lewisham team also opted for relaxing colours in its planting scheme (purples, blues, yellows, lilacs) to create a calming atmosphere and help reduce anxiety.

3. Work in the community

Your garden will flourish the more the community buys into it and makes it its own. At one level, this means encouraging green-fingered locals to take part and contribute their skills. On another, it might mean engaging the support of any local organisation that could contribute.

In Lewisham, building relations with three nearby mental health units has meant there is a constant stream of people wanting to take part in the gardening every week.

If you're creating a garden in a church yard, you may need to talk to your local Diocesan office about your plans and seek permission for things like tree-planting and the placement of benches.

If you're short of keen gardeners – and that's unlikely – think laterally. Is there a horticultural society in your town, or are there allotments? Would any of those people like to join in with your community garden?



4. Make gardening a regular thing

People will turn up to ad hoc gardening days, but, if you set up a weekly or monthly gardening rota, everyone knows when and where to be. Once it's in people's diaries, you become a priority and more people turn up.

At Lewisham, setting a time and a day of the week has created a regular fixture for volunteers. That enables mental health workers to set aside time to bring patients out to the gardens.

And, it doesn't matter if it rains, snows or hails. Take a leaf out of the Lewisham team's book. If the weather is dreadful, go indoors and plant seeds, clean your tools, or plan next year's gardening endeavours. There's always something to do.

5. Use social media

Creating a community garden means reaching the widest number of people in the community as you can. One great way to do this is on social media.

Set up a page and keep people informed with what's going on. Send invitations to gardening days, and show pictures of how lovely it's all looking. Then, ask everyone involved to share these posts, and soon you'll be reaching a much wider audience than you thought possible.

If there's someone in your community who's particularly good at doing this, ask if they would be able to take on the task.

6. Have a good water supply

Plants need watering. So, how will you keep your plants watered? Think about this at the start and ensure you've got a good water supply.

The Lewisham team has been using watering cans. But that's hard work. So, a stand pipe is about to be installed, from which a hose can be run.

Work out what is best for you, and then set up a watering rota.

7. Right plants, right places

You can create a beautiful garden anywhere, you've just got to use the right plants for the right places. So, find out what soil you have: is it clay, chalk or loam?

Then, look at how much shade and sun you get. The combination will tell you what you can plant. If you're not sure, ask for advice at a good plant nursery, or seek the advice of keen gardeners in your community. What works in their gardens?

The Lewisham team opted for sun-loving plants such as echinacea and verbena, and used the garden's walls to support espaliered and fanned fruit trees.

8. Store tools securely

A regular gardening project like this needs tools. Store tools securely on site for easy access.

At Lewisham, everything is tucked away, except the wheelbarrows, which brides walk past as they enter the church on their big day!



9. Go for the best

Being in the garden is a treat for other people, so go for the best benches that you can afford.

It will also help to explain what you're doing if you have an interpretation board explaining everything to passers-by. At Lewisham, some 1,500 people walk along the footpath in the garden every day. So, an interpretation board helped tell the story of the garden to those people, who then started to come in and use it, having lunch, a coffee, a book. The better-quality board you have, the more professional you look.

Worried about money? Grants are available from major supermarkets including:

- Tesco: groundwork.org.uk/sites/tescocommunityscheme
- Sainsbury's: sfct.org.uk/about.html
- Asda: asdafoundation.org
- Waitrose: waitrose.com/content/waitrose/en/home/inspiration/community_matters.html.

The Lewisham team gained all its funding from grants.

10. Relax and enjoy it!

Once the hard work is done, make sure you take time to relax and enjoy the garden. The Lewisham team has time for tea and cake at the end of each gardening session, with a couple of minutes of mindfulness to wrap up the session.

But, outside that time, it's been important to the team members to come in and simply sit and enjoy the garden, taking in the beauty of that season's flowers, listen to the birds, and relax.

Reflect

After you've done your gardening, why not take a few minutes over a cuppa to reflect on what Psalm 23 means to you as a group, a reflect on your gardening day? Use our handy resources: psalm23garden.co.uk/reflections.

