published in The Queen's Nursing Institute,
15 July 2024

link to The Queen's Nursing Institute article [1]



Neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote of “the pure and intense joy, a blessing, to feel the sun on my face and the wind in my hair, to hear birds, to see, touch and fondle the living plants. Some essential connection and communion with nature was re-established,” upon leaving hospital after a spell of several weeks.He used to take his patients for walks in the New York Botanical Garden, sensing the “calming and organizing effects on the brain.” For patients with spinal cord injury in the UK, there are beautiful vibrant gardens within NHS spinal centres, nurturing hope, recovery and relationships.

Planting the seed

Horatio Chapple was a young man who dreamed of becoming a doctor and who volunteered at the Duke of Cornwall Spinal Treatment Centre in Salisbury, where he saw the frustration, and devastation, of spinal cord injury. Sensing that an immersive garden, and an escape from the scrubs and smells of the hospital environment, could improve wellbeing, he began fundraising for what he called ‘The Jubilee Garden’ to celebrate 25 years of the spinal centre.

Tragically Horatio died in 2011, at the age of 17, on a science trip to Svalbard in the Arctic, when a polar bear attacked his camp. But his seed of an idea for a therapeutic garden had been planted and has since been nourished and cultivated by his mother, Dr Olivia Chapple OBE [2], founder of the charity Horatio’s Garden.

Horatio’s Garden, like the QNI, is now one of the beneficiary charities of the National Garden Scheme, which raises millions of pounds for nursing and health charities every year.

Bearing fruit

In 2012, the designer Cleve West created Horatio’s Garden South West [3] on what was otherwise to become a car park at the Duke of Cornwall Spinal Treatment Centre in Salisbury. Since then, the charity has opened beautiful and biodiverse gardens in Stoke Mandeville, the Midlands, London (Stanmore), Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Horatio’s Garden Sheffield & East is currently being built and is due to open in 2025, and it is the charity’s vision to grow these gardens in all 11 NHS spinal injury centres in the UK.

Each garden is the brainchild of a different celebrated designer. RHS Chelsea Gold Medal Winner and presenter of BBC Gardeners' World Joe Swift was the leading designer for Horatio's Garden Stoke Mandeville [4], the home of wheelchair sport. He calls it the most important garden he has ever designed, knowing that it would affect hundreds of patients, their families and friends.

In full bloom

A kaleidoscope of colour awaits in Horatio's Gardens; asters, geraniums and irises take centre stage alongside Ajuga incisa 'Blue Enigma', Epimedium 'Amber Queen', Penstemon digitalis 'Dark Towers' and, of course, Aruncus 'Horatio' and the specially bred, cream coloured 'Horatio's Garden Rose'.

Water features at wheelchair height and vibrant, layered planting ensure a multisensory experience. Whether in beds or wheelchairs, patients can grow and cultivate their own herbs, vegetables and flowers in accessible greenhouses or raised planters – or play boccia [5], the Paralympic sport, in Horatio's Garden Northern Ireland [6].

Mostly though, the gardens are a place to simply be, in a world dominated by doing. Secluded areas and light, homely 'garden rooms' allow for contemplation and conversation, with volunteers on hand to listen over a cup of tea, offering over 13,000 hours of time each year for patients, visitors and plants alike.

Gardening the mind

"It's a physical injury but a psychological battle," says Dr Olivia Chapple, reflecting on spinal cord injury. Hospitalised for months, or even a year, patients with spinal cord injuries [7] are more likely than the general population to experience depression, anxiety or PTSD.

"Horatio's Garden is the thing that has kept me sane. I can feel the tension going out of my body whenever I come here. The garden has made a massive difference to me," said one visitor.

"For me, it's the peace that the garden gave my mind. Time to breathe, be away from the chaos of the ward and to be happy," said Lowrie, injured after a fall.

91% of patients report that Horatio's Garden improves their mental health. Sometimes, gardens and nature can be more powerful than any medication. "The garden looks after us," said horticulturalist Monty Don.

It's not only the natural environment [8] that nurtures the body, mind and soul in a Horatio's Garden: an enhanced arts programme, comprising everything from photography to watercolour painting, willow weaving, glass fusing and creative writing, and live music performances, are offering headspace and an opportunity for physical rehabilitation and to learn new skills.

Talking trees

Did you know that trees can communicate [9] disease and distress to each other through underground fungal networks? German forester and author of "The Hidden Life of Trees: What they feel, how they communicate" Peter Wohlleben, suggests they send silent messages of alarm to each other through chemical, hormonal, and slow-pulsing electrical signals. (It's less clear what messages they send to their neighbours when they feel content.)

In Horatio's Gardens there are times to talk, perhaps also to communicate distress, or simply to share family life – and times to be silent, reflect and just be still.

"It's wonderful for visitors to come to a joyful garden. Spending time as a family together in Horatio's Garden makes visiting a much happier occasion," says Rory. "The kids really love the garden too, as they get to run around and play on their scooters." Others value tranquillity and peace – perhaps, like trees, needing no words. "Just being able to chill outside and watch the birds having fun in the water features has been great. It's simple, but it's something I'll always remember," says Chloe.

Best in show

In 2020, Olivia Chapple won the prestigious RHS Carew Pole Award for contribution to horticulture by a non-

horticulturalist. In 2023, Horatio's Garden Chelsea, designed by Harris Bugg Studio, became the first fully accessible garden to win 'Best in Show' [10] and a Gold medal at Chelsea.

If you want to give your own garden a medal-winning make-over, and nurture your wellbeing too, monthly blogs [11] from the Head Gardeners can teach you how to harden off your seedlings in spring, before pricking out, potting on and much more. Or better still, experience the escapism for yourself at a Horatio's Garden, perhaps through volunteering [12], attending a private garden tour [13] or visiting via the National Garden Scheme. [14]

Author **Helen Cowan** is a community nurse who has experienced first-hand the impact of Horatio's Gardens, visiting with her husband, who has lived with spinal injury since 1981.

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