

HEALING GARDENS FOR CHILDREN

A summary prepared by GREENinc Landscape Architecture

A healing garden is a playful garden setting that serves as a therapeutic or healing environment for children. A garden can act as a healing agent by providing **physical & psychological stimulation**. It can also provide **solace** through play and interaction with nature. Healing gardens become the vehicle for discovering new skills and practicing & enhancing old skills.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The children visiting the garden spaces of the hospital will have different **abilities** which will have to be considered in the landscape design. The garden design should facilitate all types of **therapies** for example: play therapy, horticultural therapy, animal therapy and nature-as-therapy.

PRACTICAL REQUIREMENTS

- **Site planning:**
Garden spaces should be situated on level terrain (if possible) and should be orientated to receive year-round sun and shelter from prevailing winds. If possible, natural features, such as mature trees, rock outcroppings and water-courses should be conserved as they provide natural identity to the site.
- **Indoor – Outdoor connection:**
For children who cannot go outdoors, the window view into the garden is critically important. To have this strong visual link between indoors and outdoors, care must be given to the size and position of the windows, window coverings, as well as the distance of the beds to the nearest window. Children sitting in a wheelchair should be able to easily see over the window-sill.
- **Garden spaces located next to play rooms**
Garden spaces located adjacent to play rooms, will save time and energy for both children and their care givers, and will make the garden spaces more inviting to use.
- **Garden spaces located near public areas (entrances, waiting areas, cafeterias)**
When garden spaces are visible from public areas, it reinforces a friendly, welcoming message to patients and visitors. Visiting a hospital is mostly a stressful experience and the garden spaces can only provide therapeutic value if visitors are aware of their existence.
- **Security**
The garden spaces of the hospital should only be accessible through the security controlled entrance to the hospital.
- **Micro-climate**
It is important to provide shelter from sun, wind and rain, as the natural elements should not prevent people from visiting the garden.
- **Accessibility to garden spaces**
The threshold and type of door leading to the garden should be easily managed by children with moving difficulties. On a practical level, doorways should be wide enough to allow wheelchairs, gurney etc. to pass through without difficulty.
- **Usability of garden spaces for children with movement impairments**
Garden spaces should be designed so that it is usable for children using wheelchairs, walkers, cots and gurneys. Attention must be given to the steepness of ramps, the width of pathways and the choice of paving materials. Raised path edges will allow children in wheelchairs to safely move though the garden without being assisted by an adult. Raised planters, water features and sand boxes will bring the garden to the level of a child confined to a wheelchair. For children lying on gurneys interesting elements like wind chimes or bird feeders can be placed in the lower branches of trees.
- **Usability of garden spaces for children with sensory impairments**
Care should be given to safety, orientation and way finding for sight impaired children. Signage is important for hearing impaired children who need visual clues for orientation and way finding.
- **Garden spaces providing choice**

- The garden spaces should be designed in such a way to include all patient types, from children coming for routine procedures to children undergoing intense occupational therapy.
- A broad range of settings should be provided to accommodate children being together, as well as children being able to withdraw from the group to be with their families or to simply be alone.
- The garden and play spaces should allow children to explore and to discover the level of challenge that they are comfortable with.
- A choice of settings that range from private to public should be provided. This can be done through looking at the size of the space as well as the sense of enclosure (or privacy) it provides.
- Garden spaces should offer different types of seating and seating arrangements. Care should be taken with the material choice and construction of seating. Benches can be arranged to support or discourage social interaction
- **Child – Nature interaction**
 - Children should have as many opportunities as possible to interact with nature through their senses and through hands-on-activities such as planting and harvesting.
 - Plant material should be selected for their sensory interest, play value and functional value, such as providing shade.
 - Animals are particularly fascinating to children and can offer a powerful therapeutic effect. Birds, butterflies and insects can be encouraged to visit the garden through indigenous plant material, water and shelter.
 - Water should be incorporated if possible as the sight and sound of water are particularly soothing and is also a popular play material.
 - One of the fundamentals of children’s play is the desire to manipulate their environment. Movable items, such as wheeled toys, watering cans and toys in a sand box will be sources of delight for both patients and siblings.
- **Art**
Inclusion of artists on the design team and the integration of temporary and permanent works of art into the landscape, will add aesthetic richness and symbolic meaning to the garden experience.
- **Volunteers**
Most therapeutic/healing gardens rely on volunteers to help maintain them and to work with the children. The provision of high quality garden spaces is a major incentive to attract and retain committed volunteers.
- **Storage**
Richness and diversity will be added to the garden spaces and the therapy programmes, if many movable items can be stored next to or in the garden space.
- **Maintenance**
The landscape design should consider the future maintenance requirements and budget.

Source:

Clare Cooper Marcus & Marni Barnes: *Healing Gardens, Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations*,
John Wiley & Sons, 1999