



Green Healing: How Nature Speaks to Our Spirits

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My daughter Kate's second summer of life coincided with my new gardening obsession. After fun, busy toddler mornings full of books, blocks, and Big Bird, she would nap and I would sneak outside, baby monitor clipped to my back pocket. A peaceful interlude of weeding restored my equilibrium in those days. Like a meditation, with only the sounds of the birds and the breeze, the repetitive digging and pulling calmed me.

Humans have sought solace in green spaces since creation, but only recently has science confirmed that time in nature restores the whole person. In 1984, a groundbreaking study by Roger Ulrich found that hospital patients with a green window view healed quicker, complained less, and requested less pain medication than similar patients with only a view of another wall. Since Ulrich's pioneering work in therapeutic environments, healthcare facilities and homeowners alike have begun to incorporate "healing gardens" into their landscaping. Healing gardens are spaces designed to provide solace and stimulation through interaction with nature.

Landscape architect Naomi Sachs

founded the Therapeutic Landscapes Network, which connects healthcare and horticulture professionals and educates people about nature's healing powers. She also helps homeowners design healing gardens. "Time spent in nature is good for us," she said in a recent interview. "It reduces stress, lowers our heart rate and our blood pressure."

We can create healing gardens at home, but first, Sachs suggests, we must discover what we want and what we need. What comforts or inspires us? "What you have to decide is what's missing," says Sachs. "What brings you joy? Do you need a place to play? A place to garden? Do you want to encourage wildlife to visit your backyard?"

Plants and water have a universal healing effect. "We would die without plants and oxygen and water, and those, in terms of research, have been found to be the things that people respond to the most," says Sachs. Incorporating plants could mean filling a container with colorful annuals or planting a shade tree. Incorporating water could mean adding a solar fountain to a perennial bed or digging a pond.

Working in the garden has physi-

cal as well as emotional benefits. A day digging and weeding satisfies us and provides a healthy dose of fresh air and sunshine. However, a healing space should bring us joy, not end up on the "honey-do list." "A big garden could be a source of stress for people who work forty to sixty hours a week," Sachs advises. "A low-maintenance garden would a much better choice."

Healing gardens should be chemical-free, Sachs says. "Personally, I don't think you can have a healing garden if it's not good for the earth as well, because that's the whole point—you are connected with nature and the environment, so you are taking care of it so it can take care of you." She encourages the use of native plants that attract and support beneficial insects such as honeybees.

Perhaps gardens heal us because, like the plants, we are also God's creation. "We are totally connected, part of that web," says Sachs, "and that's partly what makes us feel so good about being outside." ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana. For more on the Therapeutic Landscapes Network, go to www.healinglandscapes.org/index.html.