

Is a career in social and therapeutic horticulture for me?

The purpose of this Briefing Sheet is to help people decide whether they wish to pursue a career in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture, either as a career change (which is often the case) or as a first career. In order to help you answer this question it is helpful first to define what is meant by Social and Therapeutic Horticulture.

There are many ways to describe the process of using plants and horticulture as a therapeutic medium. The different descriptions such as Horticultural therapy, garden therapy, Green Care, community gardening and healing gardening are all used in the UK alongside others. Each description can be used to describe the different ways the process is used, what setting it takes place in and what the collective aims that setting and the people who are involved in that setting have. The term of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture is defined as 'the process by which individuals may develop well-being using plants and horticulture. This is achieved by active or passive involvement.' This term was first adopted at a UK conference on professional development in 1999.

In practical terms this means that practitioners and professionals support individuals through these therapeutic processes in differing ways which can largely fall into the following descriptions.

A practitioner of Social and therapeutic horticulture

This practitioner is likely to be using a holistic approach to a person's care by providing many STH programmes and sessions that are designed specifically to meet all of the individual's needs and trying to assess and record all of the impact these programmes have as part of the service offered by the practitioner and their setting.

A practitioner of Horticultural therapy

This practitioner is likely to be working towards meeting one or two specific needs of an individual and is probably working as part of a multi-agency or a multi-disciplinary team. They will probably be assessing and recording information that will form part of that team's overall assessment framework.

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A Practitioner of Garden therapy or healing gardens

This practitioner may be allowing the natural and passive elements of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture to be beneficial to those individuals who attend the garden. The practitioner is likely to design sessions and programmes that encourage sensory interaction between the individual and the garden environment.

A practitioner of social or community gardening

This practitioner is likely to be encouraging individuals to benefit from the social elements of gardening and providing programmes and sessions that expose the individuals that attend to these social elements.

As well as the many differing ways of supporting individuals there are also many different settings in which a practitioner can work. These can be broken down into independent settings and settings attached to a service.

Independent settings

Independent settings could be charities, voluntary services and non profit making organisations; they could also be part of a local authority's provision. They could be anything from 2 or 3 clients attending a garden once a week to projects that have 100 clients attend over a week and visiting many other settings; such as out reach projects. They could be working with just one client group or have many different client groups attending and gardening in mixed as well as client specific groups. Working in an independent setting a practitioner is likely to work towards a holistic approach and provide services that meet a variety of an individuals needs.

Settings attached to other services

These settings are more likely to be offering one type of service to one type of client group. From schools with a garden to stroke rehabilitation services there are many projects attached to other services and their number would appear to be growing. Within these settings you are likely to be working along side other service provision and as part of a team the practitioner contributes to the holistic care of individuals by providing one or two services that meets a variety of an individuals needs.

Typical work activities

Since individuals and project settings differ so greatly it is hard to define a typical day whilst working as a practitioner; however typical work activities will include:

- supporting individuals with diverse needs to garden;
- designing and implementing horticultural programmes for people of all ages with disabilities;
- setting tasks according to the physical and mental needs/abilities of individuals;

- teaching individuals horticultural tasks such as sowing seeds, setting out plants, moving compost bags, planting out, lawn mowing, soil preparation and pruning;
- demonstrating the use of tools and materials to ensure they are used safely;
- liaising with external statutory and voluntary services to provide a multidisciplinary, person-centred approach;
- using assessment methods in order to record, monitor and evaluate individual achievements, which may include making initial assessments, planning daily tasks and supporting individuals often using a diary system;
- carrying out regular one-to-one appraisals, updates and reviews;
- maintaining daily records, including job sheets, time sheets and individual portfolios of evidence of work;
- advising on equipment and techniques for older people and people with mobility or sensory impairments;
- planning each day's work with individuals;
- helping individuals record their tasks by writing simple summaries or drawing pictures;
- helping individuals to develop confidence and self-esteem through their work;
- assisting individuals to improve their social and practical horticulture skills;
- closely observing individuals to monitor their progress;
- assessing the effectiveness of individual programmes;
- adjusting activities to make them more effective;
- taking part in discussions with other professionals, such as social workers and psychologists;
- programming and monitoring budgets;
- supporting individuals to achieve qualifications (if applicable).

With such a varied range of settings and extensive range of work activities involved in successful delivery of social and therapeutic horticulture programmes it is hardly surprising that a wide range of qualifications, skills and experiences are required when entering this career field. For details about qualifications and how to obtain these please refer to our briefing sheet no. 3a 'Careers in social and therapeutic horticulture, from getting in to getting on'.

Experience

The most important experience required is in practical gardening/horticulture, closely followed by experience working with people with a wide range of disabilities. A great way to obtain this experience is by volunteering at a horticulture project (contact Thrive to find a project in your area). Prior experience in Health, Social Care or Education can also be very beneficial.

Skills and personal qualities

Someone with a 'passion for people and plants' is a good way of describing the personal qualities required to happily pursue a career in social and therapeutic horticulture. As with experience, horticulture and people skills come top of the list of skills required. People skills should include, empathy, good communication (both verbal and written), approachable and friendly. It is necessary to be adaptable and flexible in your work and have the ability to work on a variety of tasks simultaneously; to achieve this you will need high levels of motivation, initiative, creativity and lateral thinking and have good personal organisation skills. Additional personal qualities include patience and a sense of humour.

A career in social and therapeutic horticulture has many highlights due to the diverse and challenging nature of the work. However the work can also be stressful due to client dependency and dealing with unpredictable situations.

Possibly the biggest highlight is seeing the changes in the people you are working with, as shown in this answer from a therapist about the highlights of the job:

"Watching someone's progress while attending the project – particularly an increase in confidence and social skills. To see someone achieve something that they didn't think possible, to make choices where they had none before."

"The most rewarding job I've ever had, sometimes I wonder if I'm not the one who benefits most!"

Jobs: may be advertised in Thrive website
www.thrive.org.uk,
Horticulture Week
www.hortweek.com and
other relevant newspapers
and websites