

# Aligning therapeutic gardening approaches to five levels of mental health and wellbeing

## Background and context

The health and wellbeing benefits of gardening are [well documented](#) and include better physical health, improved mental health, an opportunity to connect with others, opportunity to learn new skills and to develop an increased [connection to nature](#).

Whilst some people can access the benefits of gardening for themselves, others may need varying degrees of encouragement, support or supervision to do so. Gardening activities can be used across a range of health conditions and levels of mental health, in a wide variety of settings. Although the gardening activities in each of these contexts may look similar, what differentiates Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) from other forms of gardening is how the practitioner tailors the approach to meet the specific needs of each individual, to provide a person-centred service.

The [Therapeutic Horticulture Stakeholder Group](#), sponsored by Natural England, produced this paper with input from clinicians and other experts. The paper i) provides clarity on how gardening can be used across a range of mental health needs, ii) helps health and social care professionals assess whether a gardening activity is suitable to meet the needs of the person they are working with, and iii) helps gardening providers to identify the level of mental health need that they are able to support.

We have used the '5-levels of mental health' model, developed as part of the [NHSE Green Social Prescribing test & learn site in Nottingham](#) as the basis of our work because it provides a clear framework for describing mental health needs. We have then explored how gardening activities at each level can be differentiated in terms of:

- Who it is for
- Why it should be used
- How the individual will engage in the gardening activities
- What skills, quality assurance and evaluation processes the gardening provider will need to have in place

Although 5 discrete levels are identified in the model, it is important to remember that mental health exists on a spectrum and the 'boundaries' between levels may not always be clear cut. An individual's mental health can improve or deteriorate across a lifetime as they respond to life events and other factors, and they will move between the mental health levels as a result. Similarly, the way in which gardening is used to support them can also be adapted to reflect these changes. Some gardening providers will be able to cater for people across several mental health levels whereas others will focus on a specific level of mental health need.

# Types of gardening for mental health – matched to



## - Mental Health Levels

Source: Adapted from Bragg and Leck, 2017; Thrive, 2017 and



## 2. Aligning gardening activity with mental health need

For each level of mental health in the model, we describe a different set of gardening activities (Figure 1) which see an increasing degree of tailoring of the provision as the need of the individual increases. The different types of gardening are defined as:

**Self-directed gardening:** Gardening activities in everyday life. Aligned to Mental Health Level 0

**Social Gardening:** Social or community-based gardening with a supportive leader. Programme of gardening activity informed by garden needs or growing preferences. Aligned to Mental Health Level 1

**Social & Therapeutic Horticulture:** Gardening within an inclusive setting, led by a trained practitioner. Programme of gardening activity informed by garden needs, tailored to individual preferences. Aligned to Mental Health Level 2

**Enhanced Social & Therapeutic Horticulture:** Structured and facilitated gardening activities within an inclusive setting, led by a trained practitioner. Person-centred programme of gardening activity. Aligned to Mental Health Level 3

**Horticultural Therapy:** Structured and facilitated gardening activities, within a restricted-access setting, led by a trained practitioner with close involvement of health or care specialist. Person-centred programme of gardening activity. Aligned to Mental Health Level 4

Although Social & Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) is often used as an umbrella term to refer to *all* gardening for health and wellbeing activities, in this paper we assign the term STH explicitly to programmes delivering services at **mental health levels 2 and 3**.

In STH, a [trained practitioner](#) will adapt the time in nature, the activity and the social environment to suit the needs of the individual attending the programme, with both the practitioner and the garden forming an integral part of the therapeutic process. STH can work for a [significant range of people](#), and a properly applied programme of STH can be used:

- i) as part of a rehabilitation process, to help people recover and 'find their feet again' after an illness or a difficult time in their lives
- ii) to help people recover from a wide range of health conditions
- iii) to help slow down the deterioration in a degenerative illness
- iv) to learn new skills, which could lead to employment or becoming more active in their community
- v) to improve quality of life and support healthier lifestyles.

In Table 1, to illustrate how the gardening activities differ for each of the mental health levels, we have mapped out the following attributes:

- Who it is for - the mental health, support needs and recovery pathway of the individual as described by the NHS 5-level model
- Why it should be used - the desired outcomes and benefits for the individual engaging in the gardening activities
- How the individual will engage in the gardening activities
- What skills, quality assurance and evaluation processes the provider will need to have in place to achieve the desired outcomes for the individual

Following this, Table 2 outlines five case studies to illustrate examples of each of the gardening approaches outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Gardening activities aligned to mental health levels**

Attribute	Self-directed Gardening	Social Gardening	Social & Therapeutic Horticulture	Enhanced Social & Therapeutic Horticulture	Horticulture Therapy
<p><b>Who it is for:</b> <b>Mental health level</b></p>	<p><b>Level 0: A person who is well and wishes to take steps to safeguard their mental health</b></p> <p>This is a person who has taken their own decision to improve their mental health through a green or nature-based activity.</p>	<p><b>Level 1: A person who is at risk of developing mental ill health</b></p> <p>This is a person who is seeing their GP (or other referrer) about their mental health or may have some support from a health worker because they are struggling with isolation, low mood and anxiety including social anxiety, mild depression or a lack of motivation, structure or routine which is having a negative impact on their mental wellbeing.</p>	<p><b>Level 2: A person with mild mental ill health</b></p> <p>This is a person who needs GP support along with access to psychological therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling, short term medication and/or ongoing monitoring, and they are able to manage their mental health with this support.</p>	<p><b>Level 3: A person with moderate mental ill health</b></p> <p>This is a person who has more complex needs and requires more than one area of support, including specialists and local mental health team support.</p>	<p><b>Level 4: A person with severe or complex mental ill health</b></p> <p>This could be a person who is experiencing an acute mental health crisis which requires them to receive inpatient or intensive crisis team support, or it could be a person who has a long-term serious mental illness which affects how they function, and they need regular care and support.</p>
<p><b>Support needs</b></p>	<p>They can independently access advice and self-help resources as they need them and manage their own mental wellbeing without the need of additional support.</p>	<p>They need a low level of support which can be managed by their GP or other health care professional, sometimes with additional support and they can attend general open sessions.</p>	<p>They may need support to help them attend the first couple of sessions to settle in.</p> <p>They may need to attend specific sessions, rather than general open sessions, and while engaging in the activity, this person may need support from trained staff or volunteers</p>	<p>They may need a lot of help to engage in sessions, possibly from a support worker and/or trained staff.</p> <p>Health professionals will track and review their progress as appropriate.</p>	<p>This person might access activities within a hospital environment, such as within a hospital-based garden or therapy garden.</p> <p>Continuous support to attend from a carer or health professional</p>
<p><b>Recovery pathway</b></p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>This person will work towards the recovery goals they have identified</p>	<p>This person will have a planned pathway out of Level 3 provision, to be agreed between the client</p>	<p>There will be a planned pathway out of this provision into Level 3</p>

			with their health care professional, and they will begin to feel the benefit to both their short term and long-term recovery, with the goal of eventually being able to access Level 1 provision.	and their support team, moving into Level 2 provision, with the possibility of re-entering Level 3 provision if necessary.	provision when this person is ready, which will be agreed between the person themselves and their support team.
<b>Why Benefits and Outcome</b>	<p><b>To maintain general good health through:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time spent in nature – restorative</li> <li>• Growing – nurturing and hope</li> <li>• Increased levels of exercise</li> <li>• Reduced chances of social isolation (if gardening in a community setting)</li> <li>• Opportunity to learn new skills</li> </ul>	<p><b>To maintain general health and to gain respite and stress reduction amongst people who are showing empathy and care through:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time spent in nature – restorative</li> <li>• Growing – nurturing and hope</li> <li>• Increased levels of exercise</li> <li>• Increased social interaction</li> <li>• Opportunity to learn new skills</li> <li>• Meaningful activity</li> </ul>	<p><b>To improve general health and to gain respite and stress reduction amongst people who offer support and motivation through:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time spent in nature – restorative</li> <li>• Growing – nurturing and hope</li> <li>• Increased levels of exercise</li> <li>• Increased social interaction</li> <li>• Learning new skills; healthy food and nutrition</li> <li>• Supported, meaningful activity</li> </ul>	<p><b>To enable the experience or practice an area of recovery that an individual has identified as a priority for themselves as the expert of their own situation,</b> through the adaptation of activities and the environment to focus the benefits of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time spent in nature – restorative</li> <li>• Growing – nurturing and hope</li> <li>• Graded levels of exercises</li> <li>• Managed social interactions</li> <li>• Structured learning</li> <li>• Specific tasks / activity</li> </ul>	<p><b>To enable the experience or practice an area of recovery that an individual has identified as a priority for themselves as the expert of their own situation,</b> through the adaptation of activities and the environment to focus the benefits of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time spent in nature – restorative</li> <li>• Growing – nurturing and hope</li> <li>• Graded levels of exercises</li> <li>• Managed social interactions</li> <li>• Structured learning</li> <li>• Specific tasks / activity</li> </ul>
<b>How - engagement</b>	As and when they wish	Either ad-hoc or regular attendance Access times/days may be predetermined according to setting	Regular attendance - for a set time period or a specific programme Access times/days predetermined according to provision	Regular attendance - for a set time period or a specific programme Access times/days predetermined according to provision	Regular attendance as directed by mental health care team In patient or specialist programme

<p><b>What Provider Skills</b></p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Ability to manage the garden.          Ability to ensure a positive social environment.          Non-judgemental and inclusive.          Mental health awareness.          Considerate, kind, putting people's needs before plants/garden needs.          Recognising it isn't just about the gardening.</p>	<p>Significant gardening experience or horticulture qualification.          Mental health first aid and awareness.          Good facilitation skills.          Conflict resolution and positive behavioural support skills.          Ability to adapt horticulture to be accessible.</p>	<p>Significant gardening experience or horticulture qualification.          Fuller experience or education in Mental health support.          Understanding of the recovery model.          Understanding of how to assess needs in relation to the garden and measure change using outcome measurement.          Excellent group facilitation skills.          Ability to develop rapport with people significantly impacted by mental ill health.          Conflict resolution and positive behavioural support skills.          Ability to adapt and grade horticulture to be accessible.</p>	<p>Significant gardening experience or horticulture qualification.          Fuller experience, training or education in Mental health support.          Understanding the recovery model.          Understanding of how to assess needs in relation to the garden and measure change using outcome measurement.          Excellent group facilitation skills.          Ability to develop rapport with people significantly impacted by mental ill health.          Coaching, or understanding of person-centred therapies.          Conflict resolution and positive behavioural support skills.          Ability to adapt and grade horticulture to be accessible.</p>
<p><b>Quality Assurance</b></p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>H&amp;S within garden environment</p>	<p>Safeguarding policies and procedures.          H&amp;S within garden environment.          Task-based risk assessments.</p>	<p>Safeguarding policies and procedures.          H&amp;S within garden environment.          Task-based risk assessments.          Individual risk assessments.</p>	<p>Safeguarding policies and procedures.          H&amp;S within garden environment          Task-based risk assessments</p>

			Agreed process and contact to access in the case of a crisis.	Agreed process and contact to access in the case of a crisis. Ongoing communication between the provider and referrer	Individual risk assessments Agreed process in the case of a crisis. Ongoing communication between the referrer and the provider.
<b>Evaluation</b>	N/A	Some outcome measurement at the project/site level, often related to funder requirements	Outcome measurement aligned to programme goals and possibly	Outcome measurement aligned to programme goals Specific measured outcomes and set goals in relation to health and need	Specific measured outcomes and progression in relation to health and need As per NHS Mental Health and wellbeing service requirements

**Table 2. Case Studies**

Gardening activity aligned to mental health level	Case studies
<p><b>Self-directed Gardening:</b> Gardening activities in everyday life</p> <p><b>Level 0: A person who is well and wishes to take steps to safeguard their mental health</b></p>	<p><b>Who:</b> Mohammed</p> <p><b>Why:</b> Although he had never suffered from mental health challenges, Mohammed, a nurse in a major London hospital, was finding his work very challenging, was feeling more exhausted as the months passed and was unsure how to create space to reflect and rest. Mohammed had heard from his colleagues about a new Wellbeing Garden in the hospital grounds that had been developed in partnership with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS).</p> <p><b>Where and how:</b> Mohammed decided to join a ‘Spring Cleanse’ event being run for hospital staff by the RHS and a qualified local herbalist, involving herbs grown in the garden being made into teas. The workshop was part of a broader wellbeing programme of monthly activities designed to encourage staff to take notice of the changing seasons and become more ‘nature connected’.</p> <p><b>How did it help:</b> At the workshop Mohammed chatted with colleagues from other departments which gave him ideas about improving things on his ward. Getting into the fresh air and paying attention to things that were growing helped take his mind off the stresses of his job. <i>“The RHS staff and herbalist were so welcoming and provided a space to reflect, I now join the weekly gardening group which feels very calming and have put some seeds in at home with my children.”</i></p>
<p><b>Social Gardening:</b> Social or community-based gardening with a supportive leader</p> <p><b>Level 1: A person who is at risk of developing mental ill health</b></p>	<p><b>Who:</b> Leslie</p> <p><b>Why:</b> Leslie was in the aftermath of intensive cancer treatment for a tumour affecting his head. He had been through weeks of radiotherapy and was feeling lonely and isolated.</p> <p><b>Where and how:</b> Leslie was interested in learning about gardening and having seen poster advertising Thrive’s Sow &amp; Grow programme for the over-50s – joined this programme that brings together small groups of socially isolated older people by providing a 12-week tabletop group gardening course in the Thrive Gardens. The programme introduced him to many gardening activities: <i>“It was very interesting. I met new people, most of them had their own garden and the ladies in particular knew the names of the plants and I learnt from them too.”</i></p> <p><b>How did it help?</b> Leslie says Thrive’s programmes have boosted him mentally, physically and emotionally. Being deemed as clinically vulnerable and in a high-risk category meant that during lockdowns Leslie was socially isolated. Coming to Thrive provided social contact that has benefited his emotional wellbeing: <i>“If it hadn’t been for this, I wouldn’t have got out anywhere. I have enjoyed every minute of it. It’s been very good; the people were all very nice”</i>. Indeed, since Leslie’s Sow &amp; Grow group came to an end, he has met up with its other members outside of Thrive to stay in touch.</p>

Gardening activity aligned to mental health level	Case studies
<p><b>Social &amp; Therapeutic Horticulture:</b> Gardening within an inclusive setting, led by a trained practitioner. Programme of gardening activity informed by garden needs, tailored to individual preferences</p> <p><b>Level 2: A person with mild mental ill health</b></p>	<p><b>Who:</b> Sharon</p> <p><b>Why:</b> Supported by her GP, Sharon reached out to Thrive after day- to-day life had become too overwhelming and led to 7 months off work; she said <i>“I felt very low most days, depression had taken over”</i></p> <p><b>Where and how:</b> Sharon joined the Women’s pathway group, the first part of a stepped programme developed by Thrive for adults living with mental ill health, where she experienced the positive impact that both gardening activities and being part of a group can bring: <i>“it gives you something to focus on within the week – something good”</i></p> <p><b>How did it help?</b> Joining Thrive’s programme gave Sharon hope to seek a new way moving forward; she formed connections with others who understood her struggles and it ignited a passion to be outdoors learning new things. She returned to work and Sharon’s employer supported her to continue to attend Thrive on one day each week using her annual leave entitlement. Thrive helped to enable Sharon to feel more comfortable in situations with her line manager, who said they could see the difference it made.</p>
<p><b>Enhanced Social &amp; Therapeutic Horticulture:</b> Structured and facilitated gardening activities within an inclusive setting, led by a trained practitioner. Person-centred programme of gardening activity</p> <p><b>Level 3: A person with moderate mental ill health</b></p>	<p><b>Who:</b> Jojo</p> <p><b>Why:</b> JoJo lives alone and is 54 years old. He is living with a long-term mental health condition and was a resident at the Bethlem Royal Hospital (psychiatric hospital) for 6 years. During his time there he was a keen gardener and worked in one of the hospital gardens. An OT referred him to Thrive as part of his transition back into the community.</p> <p><b>Where and how:</b> He joined Growing Out, a programme developed by Thrive for adults experiencing mental ill health. With the support and careful planning of activities by trained STH Practitioners, Jojo was able to use gardening activities like mulching and pricking out seedlings to improve his mental and physical health.</p> <p><b>How did it help?</b> Jojo says <i>“When I finish a garden day here I feel really good. When I first joined Thrive, I felt aches and pains but now I’ve strengthened my body, and I’ve strengthened my mind and my motivation. I feel a part of something great and that’s so important.”</i> Jojo goes on to say <i>“I feel as though I’m giving back to society and making the park nice for the local people to enjoy.”</i></p>

Gardening activity aligned to mental health level	Case studies
<p><b>Horticultural Therapy:</b> Structured and facilitated gardening activities, within a closed settings, led by a trained practitioner with close involvement of health or care specialist. Person-centred programme of gardening activity</p> <p><b>Level 4: A person with severe or complex mental ill health</b></p>	<p><b>Who:</b> Fran</p> <p><b>Why:</b> Fran was admitted with acute psychosis to a locked hospital ward while she was pregnant with her second child. There were several admissions to hospital in the Borders area over a period of 5 years, particularly after the birth of her son and a diagnosis of 'Complex Trauma'. She was helicoptered off a hillside in a blizzard having gone out on a 'one-way walk'. She'd lain down in the snow and was unconscious. <i>"I had no intention of coming back. I'd had enough."</i></p> <p><b>Where and how:</b> In hospital, Fran didn't want to take care of herself, to eat or to get out of bed. Then one day, the nurse who runs the Space to Grow Project (part of the Trellis network) at the Huntlyburn Mental Health Unit brought a pot, some seeds and compost to her room. She wasn't interested at first, but then after the seeds sitting in her room for about a week, she sowed them. The next day they needed watering, so it gave Fran a reason to get up out of bed. Then the seeds sprouted and that led to more reasons to get up. Eventually, the seedlings grew too big for the pot and needed potted on, so Fran went down to the Space to Grow allotment.</p> <p>This meant not just getting up, but taking a shower, getting dressed, eating something first.</p> <p><b>How did it help?</b> Through the garden, she started coming out of herself and taking an interest in looking after herself and others. <i>"I found myself again"</i> says Fran. <i>"By the end of that admission I was teaching other patients about gardening. I was discharged from Mental Health Services a year ago and am now volunteering at the garden and helping find funding to sustain it and even to set up outlying projects."</i> Now back at work as a staff nurse and busy caring for her 2 children, Fran says, <i>"I don't think I'd be here without the garden project."</i></p>

---

Please reference this document as Therapeutic Horticulture Stakeholder Group (2024) Aligning therapeutic gardening approaches to five levels of mental health and wellbeing. Thrive: Reading. Available at: <https://www.thrive.org.uk/files/images/MH-Levels-V8-14.05.2024.pdf>