

Re-creating 'the backyard' in



A therapeutic courtyard garden at Cathedral Village, Philadelphia. Image courtesy of John Paul Carman

Outdoor areas designed to meet the needs of residents, especially those with special needs, can help these older adults feel at home

by John Paul Carman, FASLA

If asked to choose an outdoor environment in which you feel comfortable spending time, would you, like many people, say your backyard? Think back to when you were growing up. Did you play with friends in your backyard? Were there picnics and barbecues with friends and neighbors?

Did you have a garden where you grew vegetables with your grandfather or raised roses with your grandmother? These are great memories that you might try to re-create whenever possible in the places you live.

Adults moving into senior communities should also enjoy examples of gardens and landscapes they have experienced during their lifetimes. People can relate to these environments on many levels (e.g., physical, emotional, or spiritual) and through these settings recall pleasant memories. This helps confirm a new residence as *home-like*.

Moreover, the health benefits produced from interacting with nature, either passively or actively, are extensive. For instance, research has shown that the ability to see and experience nature lowers blood pressure and reduces stress (Ulrich, 1986), and that people live longer when they live in environments populated with trees (Takano et al., 2002). In addition, being outside and enjoying the daylight can maintain the body's *circadian* (or daily) rhythms, promoting a regular *wake-sleep* cycle. And vitamin D is absorbed naturally through the skin with daylight exposure as brief as 5 minutes.

How can your organization help adults, especially those with special needs, interact with the natural world? Consider designing gardens that meet the needs of individuals with Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, as well as other chronic illnesses.

Create gardens that all residents can use

Some basic concerns need to be addressed prior to designing and developing gardens for residents with special needs. Everybody involved in the design should discuss the abilities and limitations of those who will use these

senior communities

spaces. One key question to answer is: Do the gardens need to be enclosed for safety and to make sure that no one wanders away? Many times details overlooked in the design deter individuals from using outdoor areas.

The following list includes examples of things you can do to make your gardens safer and more welcoming:

- Eliminate steps and keep slopes to a minimum to make gardens accessible to everyone, including those using assistive devices such as wheelchairs or walkers.
- Make walking surfaces slightly textured for people with Parkinson's disease, who shuffle their feet when they walk.
- Choose colored walking surfaces to reduce glare, making pathways easier to see and more comfortable on the eye.
- Use furniture that reduces glare and provide sturdy, inviting chairs for individuals to sit on.

These areas should also *look* home-like. Residents need to feel as though they are experiencing gardens familiar to them, and that they belong there.

Make spaces inviting

Outdoor environments should elicit people's emotions through the senses of smell, touch, taste, sight and sound. Someone who expresses an interest in tomatoes or has a picture of family members in front of a lilac tree is offering you a clue about what will help that person reminisce. Smell, among the most powerful of senses, usually fades last as we age. And the sound of a small pond or fountain, with its trickling water, can help a person remember an old fishing hole or stream.

In addition, gardens should allow residents to interact with nature throughout the seasons. Plants that

signify autumn include October Glory Maple, Burning Bush and Blueberry, which turn a bright fall color. During the cold months, the barks of trees such as River Birch, Winterberry Holly or Witch Hazel and ornamental grasses that maintain their foliage provide interest, color and movement. Vibrant Daffodils and Forsythia herald the beginning of spring. And Crape Myrtle and Rose of Sharon offer color throughout the warm summer months. The seasonal changes in these gardens will also remind individuals of holiday events, birthdays and special occasions.

Activities encourage residents to participate in outdoor areas. Consider providing places where individuals can grow vegetables, either in a garden area or possibly in raised planters. Locate familiar plants throughout the gardens; include herbs such as basil, lavender and chives, which smell pleasant and can be used for cooking and craft projects. To create hours of entertainment, install a birdbath and a variety of bird feeders. You might even add a clothesline, as many people can relate to this element—and it can be used to hang dish towels or other basic home items. Such familiar and meaningful activities will also create conversations among residents, staff, family members and other visitors.

Think about bringing items into your gardens that you might find in many yards. A woodpile for the fireplace, for instance. Or a toolshed, and possibly a potting table. Provide simple garden tools for people to use, such as a broom for sweeping the walk and a rake for collecting leaves. A watering can and small hand trowel are also popular. Other *decorations* might include a gazing ball, whirligig, arbor or scarecrow.

Most individuals love to watch children play, so residents will usually welcome

your involving kids in outdoor areas. Consider adding a simple climbing structure off to the side. Set up simple lawn games for youngsters to play, or perhaps bring a small wading pool onto a patio to entertain young visitors.

Fun activities create a reason to get people outside. And residents look forward to enjoying such events when their family members and friends come to visit.

Finally, if you are building a new facility, consult with a landscape architect, horticultural therapist and gerontologist to determine the best ways to design your new *backyard*. Outdoor environments should aim to re-create that special sanctuary—a place where people feel safe, comfortable and at home. ☺

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