



## Stress rehabilitation through garden therapy A caregiver perspective on factors considered most essential to the recovery process

Anna A. Adevi<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mats Lieberg<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Work Science, Economy and Environmental Psychology, Box 88, SE-230 53 Alnarp, Sweden

<sup>b</sup> Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Landscape Architecture, Box 58, SE-230 53 Alnarp, Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

At the Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden in Sweden, people suffering from stress-related illness are rehabilitated through garden therapy. Empirical data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus-group interviews with the rehabilitation team. The present article is based on team members' understandings of significant factors to the stress recovery process. On-site observations were conducted to achieve a broader comprehension of the empirical data. The article is based on the caregivers' points of view, as they are presumed to be close to the course of events occurring in the garden therapy programme as a whole. The results reveal a generally complex picture of the rehabilitation form, but at the same time indicate three factors that are of primary importance: (1) sensory impressions, (2) self-chosen places in the garden, and (3) interactions between concrete and symbolic activities. The garden environment tends to "prepare, receive and open up" the participants before and after therapeutic elements, which is thought to be especially appropriate for this group. The results provide important knowledge about what kinds of factors contribute to relief and recovery from stress-related ill-health in the context of stress rehabilitation through garden therapy.

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### Introduction

#### *Nature's role in health*

Historically, people have always used nature as a powerful healing source and as a resource for recovery (Cooper Marcus and Barnes, 1999; Jakobsson, 2009). Gardens, landscapes and spirituality have been interconnected since ancient times (Tuan, 1976). Natural environments have been thought of as places that can bring people closer to God or other beliefs or as places where one can get in touch with their spiritual self (Janick, 1992; Rosenfield, 1992; Van Zuylen, 1995). Since the mid-1980s, research has indicated that gardens, parks and areas with natural greenery have beneficial effects on human health, well-being and capacity (Wilson, 1984; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al., 1991a). According to Searles (1960), nature plays a significant role in promoting mental health. Studies show that stays in natural environments and gardens offer positive stimulation of emotional, cognitive and physical functions (Ulrich, 1984; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). In relation to mental fatigue (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1990) and acute

stress symptoms (Ulrich, 1999), these positive effects on health achieved through stays in natural environments are called restorative effects.

The organization for horticultural therapy in the United States describes horticultural therapy as a process in which plants and gardening activities are used to improve people's body, mind and spirit (AHTA, 2007). Horticultural therapy is primarily based on behaviour that promotes recovery (Matsuo, 1992). In the field, humans are seen as active beings that experience meaning in life with the help of physical work. According to Kielhofner (2006), humans control their life by choosing their activities, their path of development, and how they will adapt to the surrounding world, which in turn leads to an increased quality of life. Kondo (2002) argues that places containing plants that promote calm may be more effective than parks in their conventional forms. According to him, such places are better able to instil a sense of unity with the natural world. A supportive and health-promoting garden with many green elements may help improve the quality of patient care (Ulrich, 1992a).

Most people who are experiencing low psychological power and energy do not wish to process new impressions; they first need to sort impressions they are already familiar with (Grahn, 2005). People undergoing medical treatment often feel a certain psychological vulnerability, which increases their sensitivity to new

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 40415415.

E-mail address: [anna.a.adevi@ltj.slu.se](mailto:anna.a.adevi@ltj.slu.se) (A.A. Adevi).

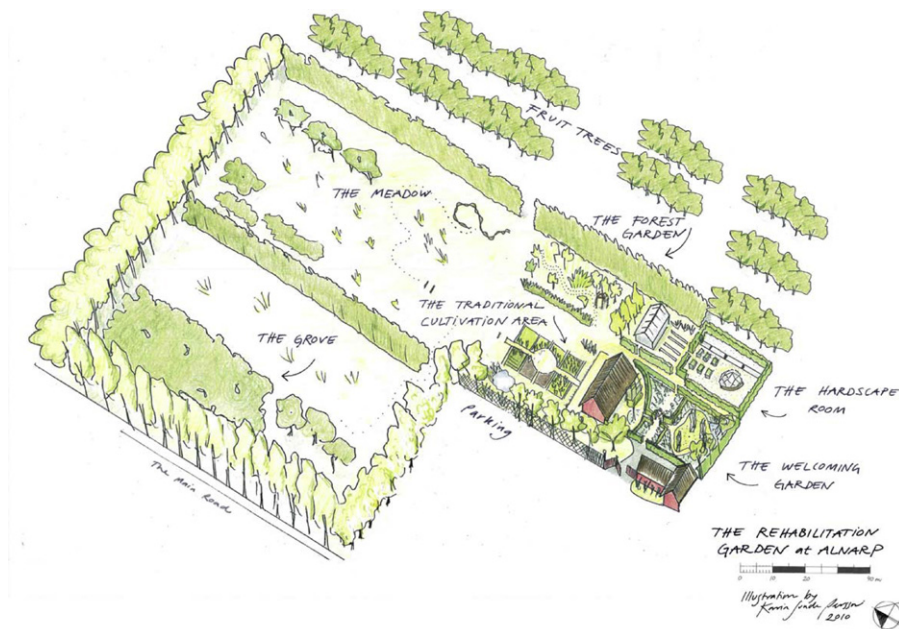


Fig. 1. Illustrated plan of the Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden (illustration by Karin Sunde-Persson, 2010).

and habitual environments (Schroeder and Anderson, 1984; Ulrich et al., 1991a; Ottosson and Grahn, 2008). “The Supporting Environment Theory” (SET) argues that the more mentally fragile and weak a person is, the more they need support from the surrounding environment. SET includes ideas about the self’s communication with the external environment (Grahn, 1991, 2005; Grahn et al., 2010).

Stress-sensitive individuals will have more opportunities to recover from stress if they are given the chance to manage a task (Pariola, 2001), if the therapeutic value is perceived as meaningful. Such individuals need to experience a balance between different activities if they are to achieve a sense of well-being (Christiansen and Baum, 1997). Cultivating plants in flowerpots is more effective at reducing negative feelings than is merely looking at plants (Endo et al., 2001). During rehabilitation, humans are supported by the plants in how they orient to reality and in their connection with the surrounding world (Lewis, 1996). Plants may be important to treatment if the focus of the therapeutic process is on how the participants participate, how they perceive and become involved with the plants using their five senses creating something with the plants or taking care of them (Matsuo, 1992).

#### Knowledge gap

Although significant relationships between nature and stress recovery have been identified in quantitative studies (Wilson, 1984; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), there is a knowledge gap in this field of research when it comes to explaining the nature of such relationships and why they exist (Magell and Viborg, 2005), especially when therapeutic elements are included. There seems to be a great deal of research on the roles of caregivers within the health-care sector in general, but a lack of research on the relatively new rehabilitation form garden therapy. Because there has been little research on garden therapy as a whole, it is natural that the caregiver’s perspective in this context has also received limited attention. The aim of the present article is to explore factors within garden therapy that caregivers in the rehabilitation team understand to be the most essential to successful stress-rehabilitation and the recovery process.

#### Exhaustion disorders

Exhaustion disorder is characterized by extreme fatigue, cognitive problems, and disrupted sleep. The condition is caused by prolonged stress and may give rise to episodic cognitive problems, tiredness, lack of empathy, aches and pains for years before the onset of the illness. The course is often prolonged with residual symptoms, mainly, enduring stress intolerance (Asberg et al., 2010). The disease often stems from a strong stress reaction related to the individual’s professional environment. It is also due to the limitlessness of work in contemporary society and the relationships at home or during free time. Severe ill-health caused by stress constitutes an existential crisis; a kind of life crisis (Maslach, 2001). Today, exhaustion disorder is mainly treated using medications such as anti-depressive psychopharmaceutical preparations and/or different forms of therapy, such as psychotherapy.

#### Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden

The Alnarp Rehabilitation Garden has been constructed to investigate whether an environment offering separate garden and nature elements can rehabilitate people afflicted by stress and exhaustion disorders. The garden consists of a 2-ha area comprising nature-like areas with restorative characteristics and traditional cultivation areas with flowerbeds, where the focus is on more demanding activities. The nature-like areas include small woods, groves and meadows. The cultivation areas include paved surfaces, traditional cultivating rooms, forest-like garden rooms and botanical rooms (Stigsdotter and Grahn, 2003). The garden is ergonomically designed, providing opportunities for participants to train their physical, sensory and cognitive functions (Abramsson and Tennart, 2003). Moreover, the distinctive features marking a nature environment versus a garden environment need to be clarified. In brief, *nature* stands for the wild, non-disciplined; for a natural dynamic and “an unknown gardener”, while *garden* contains the cultivated and ordered, with characteristics of something designed by “a known gardener”. In the present text, the concept *nature* is sometimes referred to using the word *garden*, because garden therapy as it is practised at Alnarp mainly takes place in a garden environment (Fig. 1).

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