



Design for dementia care

The value of gardens in dementia care

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I'm Garuth Chalfont. I'm a landscape architect and also a consultant in dementia care design.

I think if I was pressed to say what the significant important thing to make or break good quality dementia care, it's down to the people really, it's down to the management and the leadership, the staff that are on, how well they're trained, and their awareness, and their willingness and passion to really make a difference in people's lives, and to use the garden to those aims.

It's valuable for all of us, obviously, because we are connected to Nature, and we need to stay connected, and then when a person has dementia a lot of their normal connection gets disrupted, and so the value of nature is the sensory stimulation, the fact that it's constantly changing, it's vibrant, it's full of birds and animals and things that engage a person, and that keeps a person present in the moment, staying connected.

There is some key ingredients, one of them is it needs to be physically and visually accessible. Physical accessibility is pretty much governed by law because you need to make sure it's wheelchair-friendly and you can get in and out, and doors open wide enough, and that you don't have steps to go down, and things like that. Visual access means that when you're inside in your common area, you can look outside and you can see the garden. That's hugely important because during my research I would ask a lady, you know, do you use the garden, do you like the garden, what do you do in it? And she, if she couldn't see the garden at that moment she didn't know it existed. Well if you get up in the morning and you don't know the garden exists you're not going to get out there and do things with it, so it's got to be visually accessible for the person with dementia. Also it has to be visually accessible for staff because if they can't see a person out there using the garden they won't let that person go out because they have a duty of care, and if the garden is wrapped around a building and you can't see where a person goes, and if they're ok, then you're going to lock that door, and one of the real problems in designing a space is you can put in the most fantastic garden but it won't be used if staff cannot see people when they're outside using it.

It needs to be normal and familiar. You don't want to feel like you're living in a hotel because if you're living in a hotel you're not going to be the least bit interested in the garden because you know it's not for you to do, and you can't be involved in it because someone else is taking care of it, so the place must feel normal, must feel familiar, and it must seem that way, so I like to have things in the garden that were exactly what a person would expect to see in their own garden, so that they can feel at ease right away.

It must be purposeful, and by that I mean not just thinking of something to do to keep that person busy, but thinking of something to do that needs to be done, because we all need to be needed. Even if you're taking another person for a walk around the garden, you're helping that person experience the garden.

And when I'm training staff I mention to them when you go to the theatre the curtains open and what do you see? You see the props on stage and the props give you an idea of what can happen.

If you have a lawnmower, on the grass then that person might remember yes, this is something that I know how to do, and maybe the grass needs cutting, so having things in the environment that give the person the opportunity to do something that's meaningful, that's got a purpose to it, because the last thing that a person wants to feel is that they're being

completely taken care of. A lot of people with dementia don't feel that they even need anything, they're fine. As a matter of fact they're 30 years old, they've got to go home and make tea for their husbands, and take the kids to school, and so on and so forth, so for them to even be here is a bit of a, a bit of a shock for them, so the last thing you want to do is to do everything for that person.

There's also physiological reasons, specifically with dementia and that is, for instance, the asleep-wake pattern gets completely thrown off if you don't have enough daylight in your day, so if you spend too much time indoors your battery doesn't know when it's day or night, and you'll find people sleeping too much in the daytime. If you get outside and you have fresh air and exercise it helps you be tired at the end of the day.

When people come outside they walk, they maintain their stamina and their strength, and their balance. You come out here and there's a bit of wind, you need to maintain your balance, right, you don't ever have wind inside. But also you need to think about turning, you need to think about pulling your leg, and some people lose the ability really to walk with any sort of agility?

So I'm trying to make things happen in the garden for people so that inside their care needs don't rapidly deteriorate, because if someone sits in a chair all day and doesn't get up until they go to the dining room table, and then they come back to the lounge to sit in the chair, before long it'll take two people to help them get up, simply because you know— use it or lose it.