

What is Social & Therapeutic Horticulture (STH), and what are the benefits?

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" Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional unconscious identity with natural phenomena.... No voices now speak to man from stones, plants and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied."

Quote by Carl Gustav Jung(1964) from Man and his Symbols

As our world is recovering from the experience of the pandemic and how it has impacted all of our lives, we are looking for new ways to support this recovery process. Each individual will also come across their personal major life events that will affect them, and we are seeing this, especially now with our young people. The levels of stress and anxiety being experienced can be overwhelming, and this is where Social Therapeutic Horticulture is well-placed to address the needs of these individuals and groups. Gardening can help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, provide an outlet for physical aggression and frustration, and build self-esteem by nurturing plants. Certain bacteria in the soil are known for triggering the release of serotonin which in turn improves mood and possibly even brain function (Paddock, 2007). This means that contact with soil through play, gardening and STH benefits our well-being.

What is Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH)

Social and therapeutic horticulture is the process of using gardens, allotments, plants and plant materials within a particular method to improve mental and physical health. It will enable participants to understand themselves, achieve goals, and connect and engage with others and the environment. It will also stimulate feelings of safety, being valued and having a sense of belonging. The goal of Social Therapeutic Horticulture is to maximise social, cognitive, physical and mental well-being.

In Social Therapeutic Horticulture activities, the participants will work and connect through the medium of nature, plants and plant material. By using all their available senses, the participants will become more aware of nature in connection to themselves and their environment, regardless of their age, abilities and life phase.

Social Therapeutic Horticulture facilitators see firsthand how gardening, working with plants and experiencing the rhythm of the seasons benefit individuals and groups working with various Social Therapeutic Horticulture programmes.

Nature is a perfect environment to engage with one's senses and experience the flow of nature's lifecycle. By exploring the natural environment, you can see, feel, hear, smell and

even taste the elements that nature provides. People can relate to their own life when looking at the lifecycle that nature represents. Nature is an excellent metaphor for themes like meaning, loss, growth, change, resilience, communication, connecting, transformation, hope, and much more.

Some quotes from clients

"Caring for plants in the allotment makes me reflect on my own needs and self-care."

"It is easier talking to the plants than talking to people."

"When the going gets tough, I put the tough in the garden."

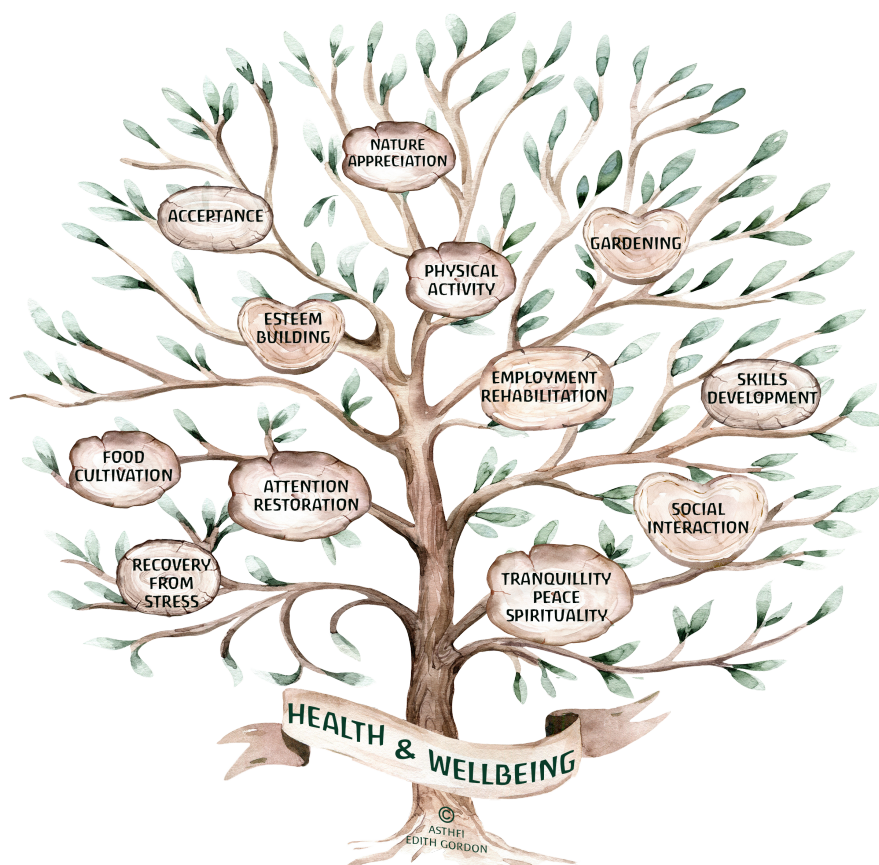
"Gardening is opening me up."

The origin of STH

Social Therapeutic Horticulture has sprouted from the field of Ecopsychology, the study of the connection between humans and nature and the field of Ecotherapy, the methodology used to heal clients through the process of reconnecting and integrating with nature and the natural environment, where the needs of the plant and the human as seen as a continuum (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak, 2001).

Social Therapeutic Horticulture emphasises the healing power of (re)connecting with nature to improve mental and physical health.

According to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, gardening was used as therapy for World War II veterans who had to be hospitalised, which increased the acceptance of gardening as therapeutic for a myriad of illnesses and physical ailments.



This tree shows the many benefits of Social Therapeutic Horticulture. With overall health and well-being that create healthy roots to make the tree flourish.

The benefits that are shown in research and reports

According to Wilsons(1984), our connection and interaction with the natural world will positively affect us as human beings. The affinity between humans and other life forms and the natural environment has always underpinned our drive to survive, overcome stress and remain mentally and physically stable.

Evidence shows that spending time in nature, as little as 10 minutes a day, improves one's mood and well-being (Frumkin et al., 2017; Louv, 2012).

Other sources of research show that there is a strong connection between nature and our physical and mental well-being, including stress relief, neurological and cardiovascular benefits and improvement of mood, where we become more centred and calm, have less anxiety and depression, and a better concentration (Bratman et al., 2015; Hattie et al., 1997; Maller et al., 2009; Thorp et al., 2011; Wilmot et al., 2012).

According to Kahn and Hasbach (2012), connecting and interacting with nature is an excellent medium for optimising our mental health and psychological development. By engaging in this selfless service with nature, we are able to develop inner peace, compassion and trust. To flourish, we need to connect more deeply to the wilderness. Reese (2016) sees the natural world as the missing aspect in conceptualising the client's well-being.

Social Therapeutic Horticulture works with a combination of the following elements; the natural environment, meaningful activities, and the social context. The benefits of this approach include the next (Bragg and Atkins, 2016):

- Psychological Restoration and increased mental wellbeing
- Reduction in depression, anxiety and stress-related symptoms
- Improvement in dementia-related symptoms
- Improved self-esteem, confidence and mood
- Increase attentional capacity and cognition
- Improved happiness, satisfaction and quality of life
- Sense of peace, calm and relaxation
- Feelings of safety and security
- Increased social contact, inclusion and sense of belonging
- Increase in work skills, meaningful activity and personal achievement

Here are two examples of STH programmes

"Hey Warrior" programme.

This programme is written for children who come into care or any child or young adult that is experiencing any form of anxiety. It is a programme for six weeks for one hour at a time. It starts with reading the story "Hey Warrior" by Karen Young. After that, the children will explore the garden space to find a plant, flower or small animal that they can identify with. From here, they are invited to draw what they have chosen. The different sessions will allow the children to breathe and enjoy the outdoor space, get to know each other and start to trust the facilitator. Over the course of the programme, the children will learn about different feelings/emotions and some coping skills in dealing with their sense of anxiety.

"Keyhole Garden" programme.

This programme is written for any group of people over the growing season. They will build and maintain a low-maintenance and self-feeding food-growing system known as a keyhole garden. After the plants are fully grown, it is time to harvest and enjoy the food.

Through the different activities from designing, building, planting, growing and harvesting, the participants will apply knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to understand themselves, achieve goals, to connect and engage with others and the environment. It will also stimulate their feelings of safety, being valued and having a sense of belonging.

The Social Therapeutic Horticulture Facilitator/Therapist in the here and now

Many Social Therapeutic Horticulture Facilitators/Therapists working on STH projects have completed specialist training programmes in social and therapeutic horticulture. They may also hold other professional qualifications in horticulture, health and social care, teaching, occupational therapy or nursing. The Social Therapeutic Horticulture programmes are designed to support individuals and groups in the growing process to achieve their full potential. The STH programmes can be categorised into three types: Vocational, Therapeutic and Social (Haller, 1998). For each programme, the STH Facilitator will work closely with the organisation in question to plan and implement an appropriate and effective programme for the participant(s).

Social Therapeutic Horticulture programmes are suitable for a variety of settings, including hospitals, (mental) healthcare facilities, nursing homes, residential homes, daycare centres, rehabilitation centres, assisted living communities, social or care farming, correctional institutions, schools, vocational training centres, community centres and community gardens. Using gardening tasks, other horticulture activities and experiencing the natural environment, the Social Therapeutic Horticulture facilitator/therapist builds a set of activities for each participant to improve their particular health needs and work on specific goals they want to achieve.

The Association of Social Therapeutic Horticulture of Ireland

As humans have always had a personal relationship with the natural world, we at ASTHFI value that relationship and use it as an essential tool to restore and enhance positive mental health, recognising each person's ability to heal from within.

Each facilitator that is a member of our association is trained to write a programme to suit the needs of the individual or group with whom they are working. Such as Nursing home residents, dementia patients, recovering addicts, people in rehabilitation, people with physical, mental, intellectual and developmental disabling conditions, veterans, foster children and foster carers, primary and secondary school students, children and adults who experience the world differently. Our members are experienced and aware of each individual's different abilities and needs within their specific environment and adhere to "Children First Guidance and Legislation".

If you want to know more about Social Therapeutic Horticulture, or if you wish for contact details of a Social Therapeutic Horticulture Facilitator in your area.

You can contact our Association via the following email: [**asthfimarch@gmail.com**](mailto:asthfimarch@gmail.com)

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