

Ninewells Community Garden: mainstreaming health and wellbeing into Urban Agriculture and greenspace networks

Ian Whitehead

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness of the potential of urban farming to provide diverse benefits for health and wellbeing. Participation in urban food gardening and social farming can contribute to better health in a number of ways, such as through providing access to better food, and the promotion of active, outdoor lifestyles. Mental health benefits arise from increased opportunities for social interaction, reduced stress levels and through greater contact with the natural environment.

Scotland has been working to promote the health benefits of urban agriculture through coordinated action on the ground, linked to policy level reforms and government-led policy initiatives including 'Our Natural Health Service' which aims to make more use of the outdoors to increase physical and mental wellbeing and to tackle health inequalities. One example of a successful project is the Ninewells Community Garden, a health-orientated initiative located in the grounds of Ninewells Hospital (a large teaching hospital located in the Scottish city of Dundee).

The initiative started in 2009 through the efforts of a group of interested volunteers working alongside National Health Service (NHS) staff to plan and create a community garden. Its mission is to promote physical activity and good health through community gardening in a sympathetic environment, whereby horticulture supports wellbeing, therapy and rehabilitation. Success has largely been the result of an ambitious vision and the dedicated commitment of volunteers.

At the time of the project's inception, there was a growing evidence base showing that green environments could also be healthy environments. Ninewells was fortunate to have extensive grounds, which provided an undeveloped health opportunity right on the doorstep of the hospital. This opportunity has been realised, with technical help and funding support from Scottish Forestry (previously Forestry Commission Scotland), through an approach whereby the outdoor garden and greenspaces complement the indoor treatment facilities of the hospital. The benefits for illness prevention, treatment, recovery and

rehabilitation have been considerable, in keeping with a growing body of empirical studies demonstrating the general health benefits of exposure to greens spaces, using several indicators.

One of the first key challenges for the Ninewells Community Garden was to establish how staff, patients, visitors and the local community made use of the Ninewells Hospital grounds. That information helped the project team to understand the changes that were needed to encourage greater access to the grounds for active recreation, socialising, rehabilitation, relaxation and health improvement activities. Following the scoping phase, implementation work started in 2011 with creation of paths, raised beds, a small orchard and a wildlife area. The project soon expanded to include a sensory garden, a physic garden and a "Leaf Room", an indoor amenity space. Nowadays, the garden is open for everyone to enjoy, including patients, staff and the local community.

The project is managed as a registered charity by a Board of Trustees which consists of local people. The skills, knowledge, leadership and governance that they provide means that the Community Garden continues to flourish. The Board members contribute many volunteer hours and are key to the success of the subgroups, where all the operational work is done. Ninewells Community Garden works with a wide range of volunteers and groups throughout the year to deliver therapeutic gardening activities for all ages and abilities and to provide a supportive environment where people, as well as plants, can flourish and grow.



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In line with increasing production of organic fruit and vegetables and an apiary producing honey, the garden provides monthly opportunities for participants to cook and eat together whilst delivering a series of healthy eating and cooking workshops for garden participants. To increase their ability to provide a range of meal options, the community garden has developed an outdoor kitchen and a dining area in the garden which is supplied with freshly harvested produce from the vegetable plots. The project has also provided additional training for volunteers in areas such as food hygiene, nutrition, mosaic workshops and biodiversity aspects. To help alleviate some of the pressures on hospital staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, the group has also set up a supported 'Drop In' facility within the garden.

The added value that volunteers bring to the Community Garden is substantial. For example, volunteers deliver lifelong learning through activities, demonstrations and encouraging participation in good horticultural practice and healthy living. The garden creates a sense of community through providing shared space and social interactions. Many of the participants want to help to create a place that is also productive; they are aware of global issues and want to link local food growing to a sustainable environment. Some of the volunteers have also acknowledged the link between being overweight and poor health and the NCG supports them with lifestyle habits.

At a strategic level, Ninewells Community Garden is working with NHS Tayside colleagues to implement the Scottish Government policy 'Our Natural Health Service'. In addition, as a member of The Dundee Green Health Partnership and an early adopter of the Green Health

Prescription pathway, Ninewells Community Garden has established a clear and simple referral route for prescribers to nature-based interventions. Through the project's links with external partner organisations, including Nature Scot, Keep Scotland Beautiful and Scottish Forestry, the work has been widely disseminated and celebrated across Scotland.

Following a 3-year grant award from Community Led Lottery funding in 2021, the Ninewells Community Garden team is now focusing on the future, consolidating work to connect people with nature, and engaging with more children, young people and families. The team is also building strong partnerships, particularly with the closest neighbouring gardens in Charleston & Menzieshill.

Ian Whitehead is a Researcher in cross-cutting approaches to urban forestry, nature-based solutions, green infrastructure and citizen participation.

More information

- Our Natural Health Service <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/contributing-healthier-scotland/our-natural-health-service>
- Our Natural Health Service Demonstration Project <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/contributing-healthier-scotland/our-natural-health-service/nhs-greenspace>
- Ninewells Community Garden: A therapeutic garden for the whole community <https://ninewellsgarden.org.uk/>