

Landscapes as Therapy



Where do many people go when feeling stressed? Many choose to go outside and engage in some kind of active or passive recreation. Being outdoors experiencing sunlight, viewing trees and flowers, listening to the sounds of water or birdsong is soothing and enhances well-being. Recently, the nurturing qualities of the outdoors have become an important topic of consideration for hospital environments. In a study of the use of outdoor space in hospitals, 95 percent of those interviewed reported a positive change in mood after spending time outside, from feeling depressed, stressed, and anxious to a more calm and balanced outlook (Marcus and Barnes, 1999). An increasing number of scientific studies back up this assertion and provide good reason for the incorporation of the natural and cultural elements of landscape in order to aid in recovery.

The Stress Factor

Stress is a natural response to events that are challenging, demanding, or threatening to our well-being and it directly affects our health. Some stressors occur as a result of not being well while other stressors are a result of the characteristics of the healthcare provider organization. Hospitals can be noisy, busy, confusing and deny a sense of privacy. Most rooms are denied a view to the outdoors but rather subject patients to the constant, un-natural hum of large fluorescent lights.

Supportive Garden Design

Current research indicates that there is an undeniable connection between nature, human stress reduction, and medical outcomes. The concept of stress reduction resulting from interaction with nature has given rise to the scientifically grounded theory of “Supportive Garden Design.” The term “supportive” refers to gardens with environmental characteristics that facilitate or support stress coping on the part of patients, visitors, and healthcare staff (Marcus and Barnes, 1999). One such garden has been recently constructed at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. The Howard Ulfelder, MD Healing Garden is a 6,300-square-foot garden on the 8th floor in the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care. (Click [here](#) for further information). Gardens like these provide wonderful examples of the way in which landscapes provide respite, stimulation, and positive distraction. Such gardens are enhanced by including design elements that encourage people to socialize, to spend desired time alone, to stroll, to engage in more vigorous exercise or to choose being in the sun or shade (Marcus and Barnes, 1999).

RDA Landscape Architects is currently working on the design for a resident garden and plaza at the John J. Foley Nursing Facility in Yaphank, NY. The current entrance to the facility is dark, isolated and disengaging to patients and their families. The new design will provide a central paved courtyard with sitting walls and conversation niches, benches, colorful and seasonal planting. The design also utilizes permeable paving to incorporate stormwater drainage directly into the design concept.

