



Welcoming summer colour in the Edinburgh Maggie's garden. All photos © Karen Laing

Gardens at the heart of wellbeing

Karen Laing

To me gardens have always been a fundamental necessity for health, happiness and wellbeing.

In my childhood naivety it never occurred to me that people didn't have gardens, that their world might not be filled with earth and plants and trees. All that intrigue and excitement of accessible nature, the space to run and dig and play, to create kingdoms and jungles and tiny sanctuaries, to engage with life, feel grass below bare feet, mud encrusted nails, concoct perfumed water from rose petals, shriek at wriggling worms and games of hide and seek, pull rhubarb from the ground thrashing about with the leaves then dipping the stems in eggcups of sugar. My fillings shriek at the very thought now. Our family garden was elemental to a happy childhood.

Aged eight, on a play date to a friend's home, I remember the strangeness of visiting a new

world, a concrete tower block in a concrete landscape. From her home we went out to play, via a strip lit corridor of identical doors. We watched illuminated numbers mark the lift's slow arrival to transport us equally slowly to the lobby. Then out through gridded glass doors, across concrete paving, then down precast concrete steps to the small tarmac play park. I hasten to add we did have fun.

Connections

What does it teach of our connection with the natural world when planners and developers have progressively stripped away our contact with green spaces in favour of concrete and tarmac? How does it imprint on those who inhabit such environments? Better I'm sure with muddy knees than bleeding ones. Children are resilient; they'll play where they can in war zones or woodlands but what an unforgiving environment to create when

choices can be made as to how our urban landscape is designed. Choices so often determined by economy of finance and imagination, with little consideration for health and wellbeing let alone happiness.

For gardeners it is instinctive that being amongst plants and nature uplifts the spirit but that instinct does not surface in everyone, not everybody gets it. But the benefit is there whether you get it or not. In the introduction to their book *Therapeutic Landscapes* Clare Cooper Marcus and Naomi Sachs write ‘a significant body of research confirms and sheds new light on what many people have known intuitively: that connection with nature is beneficial, even vital, for health. Walking in the woods, sitting on a park bench, tending the soil in one’s garden and even watching the colours and movements of nature from indoors are all passive and active ways to connect with the natural world. They awaken our senses, encourage physical movement and exercise, facilitate social connection, and reduce stress and depression.’

The positive benefits that green space and nature have on our communal wellbeing were rather forgotten in post war twentieth century urban development. Thankfully the relationship between health, wellbeing and accessible greenspace is very much on the current agenda.

The former Glasgow asylum now part of Gartnavel hospital.



Gartnavel

The starkly named Glasgow Royal Asylum for Lunatics moved to Gartnavel on the west side of Glasgow in 1843. The imposing Tudor-Gothic buildings were located on the topmost part of 66 acres of former farm land to ensure the best views were available for the benefit of patients. The value of placing health care in nature as an integral part of the curative process was understood then.

Health needs have grown and the land to develop diminished over 175 years. Now a general hospital, the campus has eaten its way into Gartnavel’s greenspace as more hospital buildings have been built along with an ever spreading black skin of car parks and roads. However there has been a renaissance of thought over the benefits of greenspace and within what is a high proportion of greenspace proportionally for a city hospital, a strong ethos to use land is now being promoted.

The Gartnavel Maggie’s Centre sits in a small wooded area where birch, pines, oaks, *Amelanchier* and katsura trees have been planted to supplement the established woodland of beech, lime and sycamore at the rear of the centre. The young birch trees gleam in the low winter sun, as I have talked some willing volunteers into washing them. After raised eyebrows at the initial suggestion, a morning in the sunshine removed the grime and algae amidst happy chatter and plentiful cups of tea.



The centre sits in the shadow of the old hospital.

At the heart of the centre sits a tranquil courtyard surrounded on all sides by glass walls seamlessly connecting the inside and outside. Nature is always visibly present. There are no barriers; no permission is needed to be there. The garden acts as a threshold offering a gentle invitation to the centres themselves, easing the emotional path to seeking support, with a place to pause and gather oneself.

Maggie's centres

I mention Gartnavel hospital because I spend a few days a month caring for the garden of the Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre there which sits in the shadow of the old east wing of the former asylum. I've been involved with Maggie's centres for several years and managing the care of the Edinburgh and Glasgow centres' gardens for the last five.

Maggie's centres are named after landscape designer Maggie Keswick. When Maggie and her husband Charles Jencks were given her diagnosis of incurable secondary breast cancer there was only a bleak windowless corridor in the Edinburgh Western General in which to console each other. Maggie saw the need for a

place close to, but apart from, the clinical environment, for people who were confronted with the mind numbing reality of a cancer diagnosis. Maggie and Charles saw a hole in the hospital machine, a need for sanctuary amidst all the despair and they began planning to create a haven of support for people affected by cancer. Already committed to designing quality environments they applied this to the centre she was determined to build. Having contact with nature, even if only through a window, was of crucial importance to the design. Sadly Maggie never saw her vision completed, but her legacy has blossomed to 22 centres so far with the commitment of her family, friends and colleagues and the many who have been inspired by her centres.

Seasons

In the peak of summer the garden of the Edinburgh Maggie's Centre has for many years called out the invitation to visit in a somewhat blousy 'Here I am come and see me' fashion, flagging up the small homely centre in a substantial hospital campus to welcome hospital staff and centre users alike.

I believe it is vital that the gardens offer sensory richness throughout the seasons. It's important that they are as generous with their offerings in deep mid-winter as in the height of summer. To enliven bare patches in the winter garden in places that will fill out later in the season we might bury sweet smelling *Skimmia* and *Sarcococca* in pots among the emerging bulbs and hellebores or place pots of shorter flowering lilies and alliums strategically amongst yet to emerge summer flowers. What gave a distinguished performance last year can't always be relied upon to do the same the following year prompting tweaking of plants and their relationships to one another to allow the gardens to be as welcoming as possible at all times.

Like most home gardeners we will use bedding plants to supplement established planting, be that pansies and primulas in winter, bringing their cheeky accents of colour, or vibrant summer bedding in containers or arranged amongst perennials.

A self-sown Buddleja among Carex, Hemerocallis and Solidago.



Positive opportunities

Maggie's gardens strive to offer positive opportunities to people living with the effects of cancer. They offer places for privacy, places to share companionship, places to relax or participate in group activities. Users can pass time absorbed by nature or tending plants or be distracted watching others caring for the garden. Gardeners in periods of treatment induced weakness can still enjoy spending time in a garden that doesn't nag them to do previously pleasurable work which is now an exhausting chore. And they can still share their enthusiasm and knowledge in conversation with the volunteers who care for the gardens.

We aim to keep the gardens vibrant throughout the year. Spring brings the optimism of new growth, summer has riotous abundance, autumn has richness and winters provide fragrant surprises. Gardens inherently have qualities apart from buildings, they are soothing, decompressing, enriching, distracting, thought provoking and benevolent. Capitalising on these qualities Maggie's gardens do so much to enhance the lives of people who experience them.





Spring tulips and hellebores at Edinburgh; Red admirals in late summer on a Eupatorium; the woodland walk at Gartnaveil.

Generous greenspace

In my adult naivety I still can't envisage life without a garden, my homely Eden, that other worldly place behind my back door. Never have I been more aware of the magical properties of gardens than when at my most wretched and fragile. Debilitated by the drugs that eventually saw off my cancer cells, sitting out in the embrace of my garden, I still felt strength. Nature thrives and reminds me I will too. I simply have to stop, breathe deeply and allow myself to just be.

This generosity of greenspace is why gardens matter so much to health and wellbeing. Well-designed green space makes the difference between thriving and impoverished shared outdoor places. Be they parks or gardens or verges they all have the potential to contribute.

Maggie's determination that we 'not lose the joy of living in the fear of dying' is at the heart of the gardens which are places of calmness and caring that are always welcoming. Places of unquestioning support.

Centre users and corporate volunteers at Gartnaveil; The inner courtyard.

Preparing leaf mould for mulching.

Karen in the Edinburgh garden with volunteers from the Peoples' Postcode Lottery.

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Karen created and cared for several gardens before working as part of the gardening team at the Beechgrove Garden. In 2007 she started designing gardens while still working part-time with Beechgrove. She designed and built medal winning show gardens for RHS Malvern and Gardening Scotland. In 2009, she moved from Aberdeen to Edinburgh to take a Master of Landscape Architecture course. She then designed and project managed three community gardens for Beechgrove. Now based in Edinburgh Karen splits her time between running her landscape design practice, some design consultancy for therapeutic gardening charity Trellis and leading volunteer groups that work in and care for the Maggie's Cancer Caring centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Maggie's centres are autonomous from the NHS and funded by charitable donation. They are located as closely as possible to the NHS cancer units they support meaning that there is no standard size centre or garden. The Glasgow and Edinburgh centres are lucky enough to have space for gardens; the Fife centre has to make do with a balcony.