



**Sunny outlook:** above, a place to sit and enjoy the sight and scent of plants restores mind and body; left, trickling water has a soothing effect and distracts from outside noise

# A garden is nature's chill pill

Get outside, plant herbs, encourage wildlife – and you'll cope far better with stress

ONLY 10 per cent of London's children regularly play in a green space. This dismal statistic is from Natural England, the Government's advisory body on the natural environment. "Children are increasingly plugged in to electronic devices and unplugged from nature," says Gayle Souter-Brown, an urban landscape consultant who specialises in designing "therapeutic" gardens for adults, children and stressed-out executives.

Green spaces in the city enable all of us to live more active lives and to be healthier. Government, designers and developers are starting to connect, and an exhibition at The Building Centre, *Rethinking the Urban Landscape*, showcases 45 green projects. These include the Herne Hill Highline, comprising 22 green roofs on commercial properties along the train tracks; a pocket park with rain gardens from a dead-end road in Bethnal Green; the revival by the local community of historic Sayes Court Garden in Deptford, and a scheme to transform school playgrounds into green play areas in Camden, which has one of the worst obesity rates in London.

We all need a nature connection in our daily life, says Souter-Brown, who, in her book *Landscape and Urban Design for Health and Well-Being* (Routledge, £34.99), explores the social, economic and environmental benefits of developing green space.

"Soft landscapes provide the opportunity to reconnect, to literally stop and smell the roses. They can restore biodiversity, rebuild wildlife corridors and absorb heat; leaves transpire to locally cool the air, provide natural shade, absorb sound and filter water and airborne pollutants. Gardens offer

Pattie Barron



positive distraction from the 'white noise' of modern life, from the information overload that comes from digital media, from pain."

Of 2,000 adults polled across the UK in a Royal Horticultural Society growing trends survey, 92 per cent said being in a garden helped them to relax and de-stress. Dr William Bird, who set up the UK's first green gym – there are now about 100 – and who is Natural England's strategic health adviser, believes there is enough evidence to include gardening and nature in the healthcare agenda, and prescribes fresh-air tonics instead of tranquillisers.

"Prescriptions for nature experiences may seem a far-fetched treatment for mild depression, but they are effective," says Dr Bird, who points out that

Photographs: Marianne Majerus

**Go wild for green: a diversity of plants encourages wildlife into the garden, while a lawn is easier on the eye than concrete and absorbs rainwater**

the move could make great economic sense for the NHS. "We could see at least a £5 health benefit for every £1 spent. Since about £60 billion is spent on long-term conditions, 80 per cent of which could be prevented by a healthier lifestyle, there is significant incentive to develop a programme that includes horticulture."

The RHS survey revealed that 62 per cent of Londoners polled were sad that they lived on a street where most of the front gardens are paved over. "We spend our lives walking down hard-paved streets. We need softness as a counterpoint," says Souter-Brown, who puts in a plea to get back in our gardens, to grass – which will also absorb rainwater – or to try a fragrant chamomile lawn.

"Today's minimal, contemporary gardens are not unlike the clean lines of the ancient monastic gardens," she says, "but those had to feed mind, body and soul, so they had a productive and sensory-rich layer as well."

The message is simple. Even if you just have a courtyard or patio, bring in fruit trees that will blossom in spring and attract the birds, sow a few edibles to pick, plant health-giving herbs and grow nectar-rich flowers to bring in beneficial insects. Make a wildlife corridor by either planting a boundary hedge or covering the fence with climbers.

Souter-Brown puts it eloquently: "We all need somewhere where we can lie back and look up at the clouds."

■ Gayle Souter-Brown is founder of Greenstone Design UK ([greenstonedesign.co.uk](http://greenstonedesign.co.uk)).

■ *Rethinking the Urban Landscape* is at The Building Centre, 26 Store Street, WC1 until February 26 ([buildingcentre.co.uk](http://buildingcentre.co.uk)).



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