

Supporting people with dementia

A guide for community gardens



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With special thanks to Crofton Park Railway Garden, Calthorpe Community Garden, Marina Chang, and Gemma Moore.

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About this guide: This guide was collaboratively produced, with suggestions and guidance from two community gardens, and by researchers working on wellbeing, health, and dementia. It is based upon an extensive academic review of the evidence on wellbeing, dementia, gardens and gardening.

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How to cite this guide: Griffin, Liza, Jack Ashton, Moïse Roche, Sebastian Crutch, Claire Waddington, Claudia Cooper, and Kay Pallaris. 2022. *Supporting People with Dementia: A Guide for Community Gardens*. London: University College London.



A close-up, high-angle photograph of a dense cluster of small, five-petaled blue flowers with yellow centers. The flowers are scattered across the frame, with some in sharp focus and others blurred in the background, creating a sense of depth. The background is a dark, almost black, color, which makes the vibrant blue and yellow of the flowers stand out prominently. The overall composition is a rich, textured field of blossoms.

**For David,
who loved his garden.**

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Dementia by numbers

1 in 14



people over the **age of 65** have dementia

1 in 6



people over the **age of 80** have dementia

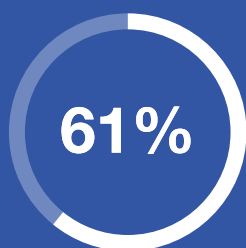
900,000 people

In the UK there are currently 900,000 people living with dementia.

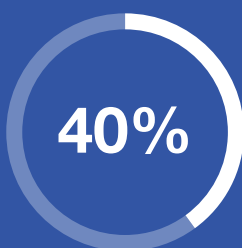
70,800 people

In the UK there are currently over 70,800 younger people (under the age of 65) living with **early-onset dementia**.

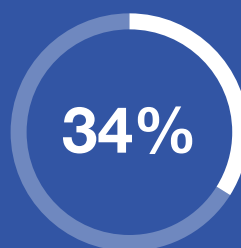
Among people with dementia...



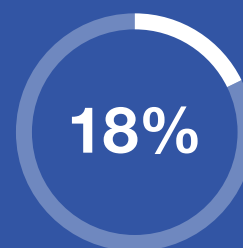
feel **depressed** or **anxious**



feel **lonely**



do **not** feel part of their **community**



are **not living well** with dementia

Forget-me-not

the small blue flower that represents dementia.





Introduction: dementia, community, and wellbeing

What is this guide about?

This guide is intended to provide you with the information you need to make your community garden a welcoming space for people living with dementia. Here you will find some general suggestions and tips on dementia-friendly spaces and practices, alongside more specific recommendations which will help your community garden to support and empower people living with dementia in your local community and beyond.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is suitable for anyone who would like to make their community garden or greenspace safe, enjoyable, and accessible for people living with dementia. This could be someone who works or volunteers in a community garden, someone who lives with dementia themselves or who supports someone living with dementia, or anyone who would like to set up a community garden that is dementia-friendly.

By reading this guide and taking positive steps to make your community garden more dementia-friendly, you can do your bit to enable people living with dementia to live confident, socially active and fulfilling lives.

Why do we need this guide?

Many community gardens already have the capacity to support people living with dementia. However, some simple changes in the day-to-day running of the garden will help to make the space more dementia-friendly. The way that a community garden is run on a daily basis is just as important as the space itself.

Community gardens are also an important part of broader support networks in local communities, and they are important spaces for encouraging cooperation, empathy, and dialogue between members of the community.

By taking practical steps to raise awareness about dementia among members of staff, regular volunteers, and first-time visitors, you can help to make your community garden a more welcoming and supportive environment for those with dementia. ✨

FIGURE 01

Forget-me-not flowers.

Credit: Liza Griffin.



What is dementia?

Dementia isn't one single disease: it is an umbrella term for a range of different progressive conditions which affect the brain. The brain is made up of nerve cells that communicate with each other and help to control the body's functions. Different diseases can damage these nerve cells, with the result that the structure and functioning of the brain itself changes, meaning that messages can't be sent to and from the brain as effectively as before.

There are many different types of dementia, and each type has different symptoms depending on which part or parts of the brain have been damaged. Some of the most common types include:

- Alzheimer's disease (which accounts for 60-70% of all dementia cases)
- vascular dementia
- dementia with Lewy bodies
- frontotemporal dementia
- mixed dementia

Each person experiences dementia in their own unique way, and no two experiences of dementia are exactly the same.

This guide aims to give you and the members of your community some ideas for supporting people living with dementia, so that they can enjoy your community garden with confidence, agency and dignity.

Each person experiences dementia in their own unique way, and no two experiences of dementia are exactly the same. However, there are some common symptoms that many people living with dementia may experience, such as:

- memory loss
- difficulty concentrating
- changes in mood
- finding it hard to carry out familiar tasks
- confusion about the time and place they are in
- challenges with other thinking skills: including communication, problem solving and visual perception

Dementia can affect a person at any stage of their life, and is a common condition across the world. In the UK there are currently 900,000 people living with dementia: 1 in 14 people over the age of 65, and 1 in 6 people over the age of 80 have dementia. Dementia which develops before the age of 65 is called young- or early-onset dementia. There are currently over 70,800 people in the UK living with young-onset dementia. It is estimated that by 2025, at least one million people in the UK will be living with dementia.

Even though the symptoms of dementia can sometimes be challenging, it is important to remember that with the right support a person with dementia can live an enjoyable and fulfilling life. This guide aims to give you and the members of your community some ideas for supporting people living with dementia, so that they can enjoy your community garden with confidence, agency and dignity. By focusing on how we can actively transform spaces to make them more dementia-friendly, instead of focusing only on what people living with dementia find difficult, you can help to make your community garden an empowering environment for all visitors and volunteers with dementia. ✨

What is a community garden?

The defining quality of a community is that it involves people coming together to support and care for each other. Community gardens can take many different forms, and they can include a broad range of spaces and environments. A community garden is simply a greenspace or piece of land gardened by and for the local community, where volunteers, employees, visitors or local residents work together to look after their part of the local ecosystem.

Community gardens may also include buildings or indoor areas which are attached to the garden, such as a community centre or a café.



FIGURE 02
A volunteer at Crofton Park Community Garden. Credit: Kay Pallaris.

A community garden is simply a greenspace or piece of land gardened by and for the local community, where volunteers, employees, visitors or local residents work together to look after their part of the local ecosystem.



FIGURE 03

Picking up leaves.
Credit: Vanessa
Berberian¹.

Some examples of a community garden include:

- open greenspaces such as fields or meadows
- ornamental flower gardens
- local allotments for growing vegetables
- spaces for organic food growing
- community cafés which use some of its own-grown food
- local conservation areas for wildlife
- community farms
- greenspaces for rest and relaxation
- greenspaces for horticultural therapy and healing
- greenspaces for exercise and recreation
- educational gardens for teaching and learning about nature

Community gardens are fantastic spaces for fostering a sense of cooperation, friendship and support, and can be an important cornerstone of any local community. They usually offer a variety of different services and types of support, from gardening groups and community events to education, nature therapy or food sharing. They are especially important for members of the community who have specific needs or requirements for living well in their day-to-day lives; and they can play a crucial role in empowering people living with dementia to live healthily and contentedly.

Some of the beneficial opportunities that community gardens provide for those involved include:

- meeting new people
- taking part in meaningful and rewarding activities
- feeling a sense of purpose by contributing to the local community
- finding comfort in the people around you
- finding refuge from the wider world
- receiving support and advice for those who need it
- relaxing and feeling secure ✨

How can community gardens help?

As explained above in the section ‘What is dementia?’, people living with dementia may experience many different symptoms during their day-to-day lives which make navigating the world a bit more challenging. Many public and private spaces in the UK, including community gardens, are often not fully equipped to support the needs of people living with dementia. This in turn can create significant barriers for people with dementia to access essential services or enjoyable experiences, even though they may really want to take part in the wider world and to live with dignity and agency.

As a result, people living with dementia commonly report experiencing higher levels of social isolation, depression and anxiety. They are likely to encounter barriers to their participation in society due to a generally poor widespread understanding of dementia.



Fortunately, the unique qualities of community gardens listed above put them in a perfect position to be a source of empowerment and support for people living with dementia. Community gardens combine social support and the opportunity for community cohesion with the beauty and calm of the natural world. By taking positive steps towards becoming a dementia-friendly space, community gardens can play a vital role in supporting people with dementia to make life good and rewarding.

FIGURE 04

Planting at the Ringway Garden. Credit: Kay Pallaris.



FIGURE 05

Watering plants at the Ringway Garden. Credit: Kay Pallaris.

Gardening in a community garden is by its very nature a social activity. So it can be a great opportunity to help address social isolation and some of the barriers to inclusion often felt by people living with dementia. Spending time in the garden can help people living with dementia improve their communication skills and enhance engagement with their surroundings. Evidence suggests that it can also lead to an increase in overall wellbeing. Spending time in community gardens is additionally associated with decreased levels of stress, better physical health and a strong sense of belonging.

Furthermore, community gardens can foster the values and approaches that are central to living as independently as possible with dementia. Community gardens can tailor the activities on offer to enable people at all levels and stages of dementia to find meaning and pleasure. Community gardens can, with consideration, be safe environments which afford autonomy and dignity, foster relationships and togetherness with family and friends, and offer new connections.

Community gardens can bring people from different walks of life together, and so present an opportunity to help overcome the social isolation which people living with dementia commonly experience. Such spaces also provide those living with dementia with the chance to interact with people from all age groups, something that they may not be able to do in a traditional care setting. Participation in community garden activities may contribute to an overall sense of citizenship, reciprocity and social cooperation, which are important elements of a healthy social life.

There is also strong evidence that community gardens can empower people living with dementia to focus on cultivating their own identity in defiance of negative preconceptions about dementia. A supportive social environment can enable people living with dementia to challenge social hierarchies and live their lives with independence and dignity.

Working in a community garden can also allow people living with dementia to work at their own pace and rhythm, engaging in gentle physical exercise and feeling a sense of purpose and accomplishment by completing small, well-defined tasks. People with dementia who visit community gardens commonly report that it allows them to come out of their shell, and to enjoy things which they may have believed that they could no longer do.

On a wider scale, welcoming people with dementia to your community garden will help to raise awareness about life with dementia within the wider community. Making your community garden dementia-friendly can help show other members of your local community that it is possible to live a rich and fulfilling life with dementia. It will help to encourage people to move beyond commonly-held assumptions about dementia that focus on what people living with dementia can't do, instead of supporting them to achieve all the things that they can do. ✨

Creating safe spaces

Accessibility: boundaries and paths

In order to make sure that your community garden is a safe and dementia-friendly space, it is important that there is a clear boundary between the garden and the outside world, especially for community gardens in cities or near busy roads. People living with dementia may sometimes lose their bearings or temporarily forget where they are, so a clear and definite boundary, such as a fence, railings, a wall or a hedge, means that visitors can wander the garden at their own pace as safely and openly as possible. Clear and readable signage will also assist with orientation.

Paths throughout the garden should be even, non-slippery and easy to follow to accommodate those who have difficulty walking. They should avoid difficult or tightly winding patterns in order to minimise potential stress. Things you can do to make garden paths more dementia-friendly include:

- ensure that paths are wide enough (at the very least 1.2 metres) to allow at least two people to walk side by side or for a wheelchair to manoeuvre easily: many people with dementia may require physical support from a carer or friend whilst moving
- make paths form one continuous loop, with destination points and no dead ends
- create paths of varying lengths that can allow people with limited mobility the opportunity for shorter walks
- build paths with even, non-slippery materials such as well-laid paving stones, brick or concrete (grit paths and other uneven surfaces are often unsuitable for people with dementia)
- make paths a clear, consistent colour without contrasting shades, patterns or dark patches (e.g. manhole covers, mosaics) as these can be interpreted as holes or steps by people with dementia
- ensure that path edges are clearly defined and contrast well with the surrounding lawn or beds, so that those with poor vision can see where the path starts and ends. You could use paint or tape with a clear colour or tonal contrast to help delineate paths or raised beds. Or you might use tactile paving at the edges of paths to delineate a route.
- ensure that visitors can easily locate themselves and retrace their steps by placing easily identifiable landmarks such as birdbaths and flowerpots beside paths
- place clear, colour-coded signs that use both images and text along routes at slightly less than eye height to help visitors navigate more easily. Consider using contrasting colours – e.g. black text on a yellow background

In general, there should be as much continuity as possible between the colours and materials used in indoor and outdoor spaces, in order to reduce potential confusion and make visitors with dementia feel more comfortable. If this isn't possible at your community garden, then try to make sure that moving between indoor and outdoor spaces is as easy and natural as possible. This could include:

- having a glare-free transition area between indoors and outdoors, which is consistently coloured and textured
- ensuring that all raised areas and buildings are accessible by ramps and/or a handrail, so that people who use a wheelchair or find it difficult to balance can move through the garden with freedom. If steps are used ensure that the edges of steps are well contrasted, e.g. with strip of contrasting paint, and with clearly contrasted/visible handrails
- camouflaging non-public doors, entrances and exits (such as fire exits and delivery doors) with murals or by painting with a single block of colour to ensure that visitors do not try to enter or exit through these by mistake
- using audio navigation technologies. People living with dementia commonly experience some form of visual impairment, and in some cases may need assistance in navigating indoor and outdoor spaces. An increasingly common means of making navigation easier for visually impaired people is to use audio navigation technologies (such as Wayfindr) which can be used with a smartphone or tablet, and guide visitors through spaces using visual directions or descriptions. These can be a useful complement to the changes listed above to help visitors to your community garden explore more safely and with greater independence
- using wheelchair ramps and accessible toilets with alarms to ensure that indoor spaces are accessible too.

There should be as much continuity as possible between the colours and materials used in indoor and outdoor spaces, in order to reduce potential confusion and make visitors with dementia feel more comfortable.

Lighting and visibility

People living with dementia may find it more difficult to navigate and explore their surroundings if visibility or the light quality is poor. This is especially important over autumn and winter, when hours of sunlight are fewer, and as light quality outdoors diminishes due to cloudy and overcast weather.

There is also growing evidence that exposure to bright (but not glaring) light during the day (such as natural sunlight) can help to decrease the amount of time people living with dementia spend sleeping during the day, and by contrast can increase the time spent sleeping during the night. It has also been shown that exposure to good quality daylight can lead to a reduction in sleep disturbance and night waking, both of which are common symptoms for certain types of dementia.

There are several things you can do to improve light visibility in your community garden both inside and outside, including:

- in hotter weather when sunlight is stronger, providing cool, shaded areas where visitors can sit and rest away from intense heat, glaring light and UV radiation
- ensuring that indoor spaces are well-lit, especially during autumn and winter months.
- avoiding extremely bright or glaring lights such as fluorescent lamps, as these can be overstimulating for people with dementia
- installing motion-activated lighting at the edge of paths and changes in terrain (such as steps or raised areas) to allow visitors to navigate the garden safely in the evening or at night.

Seating and resting spaces

People living with dementia may need to rest for a while after exploring in the garden, so it is important to have sturdy, well-made chairs or benches placed in clearly visible spots near paths and walkways. These will allow those who find it harder to stand or maintain their balance to take part in the life of your community garden without having to remain indoors or feel excluded. Some things you can do include the following:

- create resting spaces which are sheltered from strong sunlight and wet weather, providing a quiet and relaxing space to stop for a while and enjoy the garden
- seating should be comfortable, have back support and arm rests, and be placed next to a handrail or a similar sturdy support to help wheelchair users and visitors with mobility needs sit down and stand up more easily
- from the start of spring to the beginning of autumn, sunny spots in the garden can be a perfect space to place a chair or bench where visitors can sit and relax in the sunlight, providing that it is not too strong (such as in the middle of summer)
- benches placed in quieter areas of the garden away from the bustle of the outside world can provide a space for visitors to rest from sensory overstimulation and allow them to spend some time enjoying the sights, sounds and shapes of the garden and its wildlife. Contrast is also important for seating: consider its contrast from the surrounding area, and delineating the edges of seats

FIGURE 06
People sitting
on a bench.
Credit: Pexels.



Toxic plants and hazards

People living with more advanced stages of dementia may sometimes explore by handling or tasting things they find outside, such as berries, leaves of plants, and soil. Therefore, it's best to avoid plants which are poisonous or otherwise harmful when touched or eaten in both outdoor and indoor spaces. However, if necessary for the garden, these can be planted at the back of borders away from paths so that they are out of reach. Plants with prickles and thorns are also a common source of cuts and scratches, so where possible a dementia-friendly garden should avoid planting these in easily accessible-areas.

Some common plants which could be a hazard in a community garden include:

- oleanders
- foxgloves
- rhododendrons
- azaleas
- euphorbias
- yew trees
- mistletoe
- hydrangeas

Common honeysuckle, holly, nightshade, dogwood, and wisteria all grow fruit which is toxic if ingested. ✨

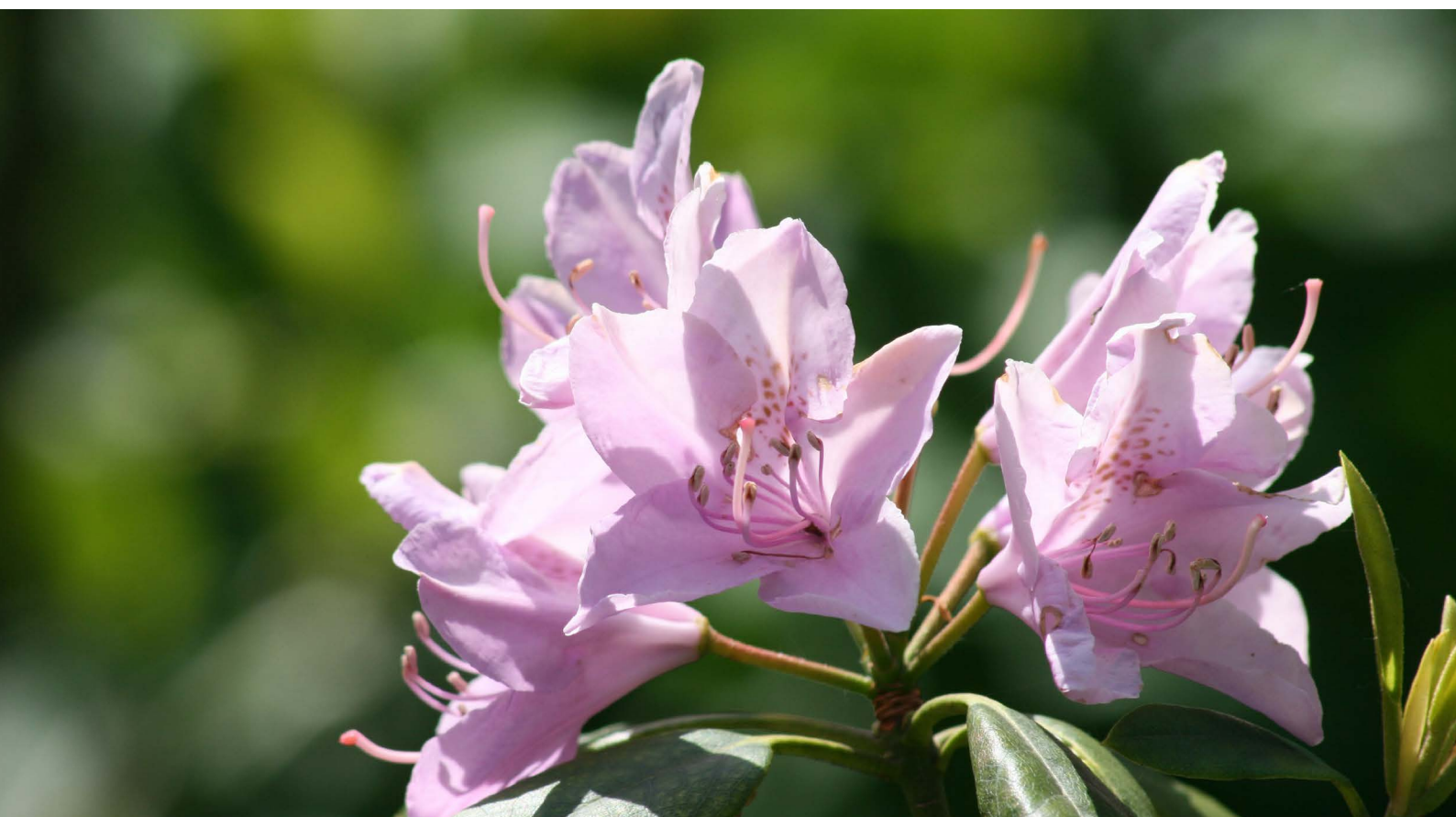


FIGURE 07

Azalea.

Credit TinaXinia.



Dementia-friendly gardening

There is always something that needs doing in a community garden, whether it is general tidying and pottering about, tending to plants, or preparing for the new growing season. Gardens environments offer familiar, repeated and manageable tasks throughout the year, which is ideal for building the confidence and enthusiasm of visitors living with dementia, as daily tasks they once found easy may have begun to seem overwhelming or unfamiliar to them.

The sheer variety of tasks available in a garden also presents a range of opportunities for people living with dementia to take charge of a particular aspect of garden life. This can help them to reinforce their sense of agency by taking on an enjoyable and comfortable responsibility, whether as an individual or as part of a community.

Gardening activities

Choosing the right activities

In general, gardening activities should be catered to the needs of each visitor and be **person-centred**. This means that in each case, the person is placed at the heart of the activity, and that the focus is on what the person *can* do and enjoys doing, not on what they can't or aren't able to do. A person-centred approach treats each individual as a person first and foremost and seeks to support them in making positive decisions about their life with confidence and dignity.

Working in the garden should allow participants to explore and flourish as individuals and as members of the community, engaging in gardening with the assurance of both safety and flexibility. There is strong evidence to show that people living with dementia benefit from engaging, interesting and creative work which is not too physically demanding but allows for flexibility, depending on individual needs. For instance, people in the early stages of dementia or with young onset dementia may be able to participate in more challenging tasks.

Community gardens should aim to offer a wide range of gardening activities that cater to the specific needs and symptoms of each person who visits. Generally, these could include:

- sowing seeds in seed trays
- pricking out seedlings
- potting plants into bigger containers
- watering raised beds or pot plants
- tidying up and collecting light garden debris
- clearing leaves with a light broom or rake
- hand weeding in a polytunnel or raised bed
- tending to plants on a greenhouse workbench
- refilling bird feeders

See '**Some ideas for dementia-friendly gardening tasks**' below for more examples of what activities you can run in your community garden.

FIGURE 08

Forking the soil. Credit: Vanessa Berberian.



In gardening activities the focus is on what the person can do and enjoys doing, not on what they can't or aren't able to do.

It is important to remember that because each person experiences dementia differently, garden tasks should be tailored according to the needs and abilities of each person. Some generally important things to consider include:

- making sure that tasks can be carried out while seated, ideally with tables or workbenches at arm height
- some tasks which require small or accurate movements (e.g. thinning out seedlings or tying knots) might be challenging for people with certain types of dementia, or with people who live with related conditions such as Parkinson's disease
- tasks should ideally be available both indoors and outdoors for when the weather is too cold or wet for safe outside working. If this option is not available, creating an outside spot sheltered from extremes of weather is also a good idea
- designing tasks to work towards specific, attainable outcomes so that anyone participating can feel that they have achieved something by working in the garden and have had the opportunity for cognitive and emotional development. People in the later stages of dementia would likely find it extremely difficult to use tools as mobility and communication difficulties can become more prominent at this stage. However, they may benefit from sensory engagement in the garden (i.e. touching leaves, smelling flowers or tasting home-grown fruit).

In general, suitable tools should be provided for each task wherever possible: people with dementia work best with tools which are light and easy to handle. Providing tools which are already familiar to visitors is another way of helping them to work with confidence in the garden. Where possible, tools such as spades, rakes and brooms should be lightweight and have long handles so that they are easy to use.

Structure

Some people living with dementia find it easier to work in the garden at their own pace, whereas others might need closer guidance, so it's helpful to group gardening tasks based on whether they require more or less assistance, or that may need to be supervised.

In general, a combination of both structured and unstructured tasks is best to offer visitors, providing a balance between careful supervision and independent exploration of the garden. Unstructured activities tend to be less suitable for those who are at a more advanced stage of dementia, or who may need closer supervision from a carer.

Unstructured activities are those which allow for more independence, and can encourage people living with dementia to experience a natural flow of activity, to make their own decisions, and to grow their self-confidence within a supportive yet explorable space. Unstructured working also provides the opportunity for cooperation with other people in the garden, and can encourage those living with dementia to socialise and explore working with other people at their own pace.

Common unstructured tasks could include lightly supervised flower picking or herb trimming, gentle weeding, gently collecting dead leaves to compost, picking up rubbish, tidying up a greenhouse, or sweeping pavement stones. The section below lists some other ideas for garden tasks that could be supervised, structural tasks or carried out in a more unstructured way. However, not all activities need to have an obvious purpose, or at least not one that is necessarily evident to all. Some may find pleasure and purpose in activities such as smoothing soil, filling and refilling pots, and raking leaves. A sense of accomplishment may be achieved in the physical sensations and social connectedness of doing, not necessarily in the achievement of a defined end goal.

Some ideas for dementia-friendly gardening tasks

Everyone experiences dementia differently, and what one person finds easy to do might be really difficult for someone else. So it is important to tailor tasks to the specific needs and abilities of each visitor to your community garden, so that everyone is able to work comfortably and at their own pace. Many of the tasks below would likely be difficult for someone whose vision/perception is impacted. The difficulty levels are more related to physical strength/mobility than the stage of dementia or specific symptoms.

Easy (suitable for most people) 🍃🍃🍃

- growing simple plants such as bean sprouts, spring onions and edible herbs in containers
- filling up pots with new compost
- watering plants both indoors and outdoors with a light watering can
- harvesting leaves from edible plants (such as picking kale leaves by hand from a raised bed, or snipping leaves from a basil plant using a pair of scissors)
- gentle weeding, such as removing small weeds from raised beds
- repotting small plants and refreshing soil
- cutting back small, leafy plants for the winter using a pair of scissors
- arranging flowers from the garden in a vase
- sweeping and tidying paths or pavements with a light, long-handled broom
- spotting wildlife visiting the garden, such as birds, foxes, hedgehogs, frogs, toads and insects



FIGURE 09

Planting.

Credit: Vanessa Berberian.

Medium (more physically demanding, but not too difficult) 🍃🍃🍃

- sowing seeds into pots or raised beds
- applying mulch to the surface of soil at waist or chest height, and with a light tool such as a trowel
- removing dead leaves from paths using a light, long-handled rake or broom
- cutting back or trimming larger plants with a comfortable pair of scissors or garden shears
- hanging up light flowerpots or baskets

Hard (more physically demanding, and requiring confidence with manual tasks) 🍃🍃🍃

- transplanting seedlings from a module tray to a pot
- pruning trees and large bushes
- collecting more varied garden waste such as dead leaves, old twigs and pruned plant material to go to compost
- taking cuttings from adult plants for propagation
- helping to prepare a raised bed, including harvesting, soil turning and planting
- training small topiaries and shrubs

Crafts and cooking

Dementia-friendly activities don't just have to take place outdoors. There are also lots of creative tasks that can take place indoors, many of which work well in groups or as small workshops. This can be a nice contrast for visitors if you have focused on more unstructured activities outside.

Popular crafting tasks help to support people living with dementia as they explore their creative side. They develop the horticultural skills they have practiced in the garden and enable them to feel valued as part of a team by working towards a common goal with others.

Common dementia-friendly indoor activities:

- flower harvesting outdoors followed by a group task focused on activities such as flower pressing, making scented flower bags or mixing dried flowers to make herbal tea infusions
- gathering fallen leaves and twigs in the garden can provide materials for a crafting session indoors, and encourage participants to explore their senses of sight, sound and touch. This may be particularly relevant for people in the later stages of dementia
- if your community garden has a kitchen on-site, harvesting and preparing ingredients for a community meal, such as picking salad leaves from raised beds, shelling peas, or tasting and smelling edible herbs. Those who feel more confident using their hands or working with ingredients could help prepare basic dishes with supervision, or learn how to make a salad dressing for the leaves they have harvested. ✨



FIGURE 10
Picking Fruit.
Credit: Vanessa
Berberian.

Sensory stimulation

As a shared space which is home to many different ecological niches, a community garden in particular is a great environment for encouraging positive sensory and emotional experiences. A dementia-friendly garden should provide safe, open spaces in which to roam and explore sources of sensory stimulation, while also offering more private areas for refuge and reflection.

Sensory stimulation is an important element in a dementia-friendly garden, since various sights, sounds, smells and touches allow people living with dementia to easily engage with their surroundings. This also encourages them to explore what is happening in their environment at the present moment, and can help to stimulate memories of previous experiences and positive emotions.

There are many things community gardens can do to make indoor and outdoor spaces welcoming to people with dementia, with a focus on appealing to the five senses: touch, smell, sight, sound and taste.

Touch

Filling your community garden with lots of textures provides a great opportunity for tactile exploration. Plants with soft leaves such as lamb's ears and sage can be reassuring to touch, and contrast with the rougher textures of tree bark and wild grasses. All plants in a dementia-friendly garden should be open to tactile exploration, but avoid potentially toxic plants and those with thorns or spiky fruits.

Smell

Any fragrant plants such as lavender and honeysuckle can be planted in garden borders to bring familiar, calming scents to the garden. Plants such as lavender, jasmine, and honeysuckle have subtle fragrances which may be comforting to people living with dementia. The fragrant petals of flowers such as chamomile, rose and some species of hibiscus can be harvested to make herbal teas, though species with thorns and prickles should be planted at the back of borders or out of immediate reach to avoid injuries. Safe, edible herbs such as mint, rosemary and thyme will provide a gentle, welcoming scent for anyone working closely with these plants.



FIGURE 11

Prickly and hard to see plants. Credit: Vanessa Berberian.

Sight

Many people living with dementia may find it more difficult to accurately judge the position or depth of objects, to tell the difference between similar colours, and to perceive colours at the blue-violet end of the spectrum. Therefore, choosing clear, contrasting colours for your community garden can help visitors to enjoy the range of hues and shades which appear in nature over the course of the year.

There are many plant species for all parts of the growing season which produce beautiful colours when flowering. As a general guide, you should:

- try to choose plants which have red, orange and yellow flowers, such as begonias, chrysanthemums, marigolds, calendula, cosmos and coneflowers. Plants with other colour flowers can be planted too, but these may not be as easily recognisable to some visitors
- plant more perennial flowering plants in your garden to encourage visitors to explore visually in the garden, and break up similar shades of green leaves which may be visually confusing
- plant deciduous trees to provide a pleasant autumnal palette of yellows, oranges and reds throughout the autumn, whereas evergreens such as pines, firs and cedars will contribute thick winter foliage which can act as a clear visual boundary in cities and built-up areas.


Sound

A garden full of wildlife and visitors will always be full of gentle, relaxing sounds which provide pleasant background noise and help visitors to feel present in the moment. A garden which welcomes bees and birds will attract relaxing sounds and invite birdsong, whereas tall grasses and bamboo planted throughout the garden will produce a gentle rustling sound when they move in the wind. Wind chimes and water features are also good for ambient sound, but try to avoid noisy garden appliances or tools where possible.

Taste

Any safely edible herbs usually used for cooking (such as basil, rosemary, mint) can provide an opportunity for people living with dementia to stimulate their taste buds. Vegetables growing in raised beds are also great to taste when used in a salad or a cooked meal. These can be incorporated into activities such as making lunch or harvesting food for the kitchen, although care should be taken to supervise any tasting in the garden so that dangerous plants are not ingested.

It is also important to check whether visitors to the garden have any allergies or intolerances to certain foods, since people with dementia may not always be able to remember or articulate this during an activity. Picking fruit from fruit trees can be a nice group activity for the summer, though it is best to avoid fruit with large stones as these can present a choking hazard. *



A garden which welcomes bees and birds will attract relaxing sounds and invite birdsong, whereas tall grasses and bamboo planted throughout the garden will produce a gentle rustling sound when they move in the wind.

FIGURE 12

A garden bird.

Credit: Jason Leung.

Creating a wildlife-friendly garden

A garden which is full of wildlife throughout the year will provide a relaxing and inviting space for all visitors from the local community and beyond. Spending time in nature can be reassuring for people living with dementia, while the presence of local flora and fauna provides a great opportunity to focus attention and encourage the recollection of memories.

Where possible, dementia-friendly gardens should provide a consistent and familiar community environment, while also allowing visitors to enjoy the natural seasonal changes in the weather, local ecosystems and plant life cycles. Spotting wildlife in the garden can also be an opportunity for people living with dementia to engage confidently with their surroundings, and to share a love of nature with other members of the community.

People with dementia may find unfamiliar situations and environments stressful or difficult to process, so a dementia-friendly garden should aim to balance the natural ecological changes through the seasons with more familiar, consistent elements of nature suitable to your community garden. These could include:

- planting evergreen trees and shrubs which provide leafy cover all year round
- planting hardy perennials which will survive the winter and flower each year in the spring
- making use of bird feeders, bug hotels or natural host plants to attract wildlife to the garden all year round

Choosing the right plants and design features can help attract local wildlife to the garden, for example:

- low-lying border plants (such as geraniums, wallflowers, salvia), shrubs (honeysuckle and buddleja), and deciduous hedgerows (beech and goat willow) provide a cosy nesting place for hedgehogs
- flowers that are rich in pollen such as crocuses and sunflowers attract bees, butterflies and other pollinators, while winter-flowering crocuses, snowdrops and winter heather will ensure that bees are also in the garden in the colder months
- bird feeders, baths and houses will attract various species of bird throughout the year, whereas trees will give them a safe space to perch and build nests
- ponds with fish or aquatic plants attract frogs and newts, alongside dragonflies and other water insects, though it is important to make sure that any water features are dementia-friendly and that there are clear boundaries around the edges to prevent slips or falls *

Supporting visitors to your community garden

Management

It is important to foster interaction between staff, those with dementia, and other visitors and users of the garden. Make sure that people know that they can ask questions or provide feedback. Consider having a feedback box or evaluating the activities on offer in your garden to ensure that people are getting the most out of them. Encourage people to share stories about what works and what doesn't, and what people have enjoyed or found stressful.

You may need to provide some training to staff and to remind visitors that there are diverse users with specific needs in the garden. For example, this might help people appreciate that tasks they may think would be straightforward - like picking up a tool from a wheelbarrow - can be trickier for someone with dementia, because seeing the tool amidst other items might pose a challenge.

Signposting to accessible courses and sources of information like websites, factsheets or short courses can be a useful way to help appreciate how dementia can impact people and how best to support them.

If people with dementia feel comfortable using sunflower lanyards these may help to indicate to staff/visitors that additional support and/or patience may be needed.

And you might want to timetable specific times or spaces for visitors with dementia. If a dementia-friendly garden space is provided, it may be possible to work with other community groups like [AgeUK](#) or [Alzheimer's Society](#) to schedule times where groups can visit or simply enjoy the space.

Involving family and friends

Dementia-friendly community gardens are as much about the social environment as they are about physical space. It is often beneficial to involve the family and friends of those living with dementia to help shape and plan suitable activities and spaces. For example, doing tasks with a companion can help model, guide, and encourage, providing both reassurance and an implicit aid to memory and the current context. Also, it can be fun and rewarding for both parties. ✨



FIGURE 13

Working with the soil. Credit: Vanessa Berberian.

Community gardens as a catalyst for change

Positive changes to make your garden dementia-friendly

Some of the positive, practical changes you can make to help your community garden become more dementia-friendly include:

- promoting dementia-friendly activities in spaces throughout the local community, such as local GP centres and hospitals, dementia cafés, faith centres, care homes, day care centres, libraries, local authorities, neighbourhood hubs, information boards at local shops and supermarkets, local markets, elderly lunch groups, carer's groups and on the websites of dementia charities. Where possible, you could share information in a face-to-face setting, as people living with dementia may not find it easy to use the internet or telephone
- carrying out a risk assessment of your community garden to identify where you could make improvements and implement changes suited to the particular needs of people living with dementia in your community. It is important to include people living with dementia in this process to provide feedback
- encouraging initial visits to your community garden to allow those living with dementia to familiarise themselves with the spaces and feel welcome before they become a regular visitor
- helping carers and family members to support someone who is living with dementia by offering staff and regular volunteers basic dementia training. This can help members of the community better understand what life with dementia is like, fostering an environment where everyone can support people living with dementia instead of trying to control them
- appointing a member of staff at your community garden as a dementia lead responsible for making sure that visitors who are living with dementia feel welcome. They can also offer support with friends, family and carers of people living with dementia, and be responsible for liaising with them about each visitor's individual needs
- involving those living with dementia in the daily activities of the garden as much as possible by providing dementia-friendly options. For example, you could make sure that all gardening activities are broken down into levels of difficulty for volunteers, ensure that lightweight, easy-to-use tools are available throughout the garden, or hold weekly volunteering sessions for people living with dementia and their families or carers. ✨

Diversity and inclusion: dementia support for everyone in the community

Despite the many benefits that community gardening offers, the gardens themselves rarely reflect the diversity of the areas where they are located. Compared to other groups, minority ethnic people tend to visit community gardens less, although they would likely benefit most from neighbourhood support and cohesion, given reports of higher risks of dementia and increased levels of social isolation in these groups.

Participation in community gardening is important for minority ethnic people living with dementia not only for the many personal and health benefits, but also in terms of equity around public spaces and social justice. Many factors can drive this lower attendance to community gardening – perhaps the effect of not feeling welcome, a reluctance to engage in certain outdoor activities, a lack of adequate transportation, or other factors.

There are, however, things that you can do to make your community gardens more inclusive and welcoming. For inclusion to work it needs to be deliberate, purposeful and acknowledge cultural differences around community space, food, activity, programming and planning around culture.

You can encourage participation from diverse community gardeners by making sure that information and communication about your community gardens is accessible to all residents. Information and communication should be multi-lingual, available in multiple formats and representative of the local community's diversity. Including illustrations of diverse populations in materials can spark interest and create a sense of belonging. Knowing the people in the neighbourhood in which the garden is located will help you determine appropriate forms of communication that best meet the needs of all residents.

You can advertise your community garden in spaces where minority ethnic people visit and spend time. Some of these spaces are listed in the previous section.

A good way to get help with making your community garden more inclusive is by building meaningful connections with organisations that serve diverse communities and by engaging with individuals who represent these communities in programming and planning of culturally appropriate activities. It is a good idea to involve diverse family, friends and carers of people living with dementia in this process. ✨

**Information and communication
about your community gardens
should be multi-lingual,
available in multiple formats
and representative of the local
community's diversity.**

Further resources

Check out [The dementia guide: Living well after your diagnosis](#) produced by the Alzheimer's Society.

AgeUK has some excellent information on [dementia](#) and on sources of [support](#).

[Dementia UK](#) has some useful and accessible information on dementia and how it impacts people's lives.

[Rare Dementia Support](#) provides help and advice for people with young onset, atypical and inherited dementias

And take a look at [UCL's Many faces of dementia](#) FutureLearn short course.

01 | [Vanessa Berberian photos](#) taken for Camden and Islington's Parks For Health Project.

02 | The [Sunflower Lanyard](#) is a recognised symbol for non-visible disabilities, also known as hidden disabilities or invisible disabilities. People living with these often face barriers in their daily lives including a lack of understanding and negative attitudes. People may choose to wear the Sunflower lanyard to discreetly identify that they may need support, help, or just a little more time in shops, transport, or public spaces.

If you found our guide helpful in your garden please get in touch with Liza on liza.griffin@ucl.ac.uk. We'd love to hear about it.