# Garden designer Dave Green champions nature’s role in mental health during Mental Health Awareness Week



“I wish we knew more about how it works,” says garden designer and landscape architect Dave Green, reflecting on the intricate relationship between nature and human wellbeing. His journey from various office jobs to championing wellbeing gardens underscores a personal conviction that immersing oneself in natural surroundings has profound positive effects on mental and physical health.

The foundation of Green's work lies in his own experiences; he notes that the rejuvenating feeling of being outdoors has been a driving force in his career. “That feeling is what has driven my career and is what propels me forward because being outdoors makes me feel so good that I want other people to experience that as well.” Despite the apparent benefits, he acknowledges that the science behind the connection between nature and mental wellness remains underexplored. “I’m trying to create nice gardens and landscapes and trying to help people that way until we work out exactly what the formula is,” he adds.

As we mark Mental Health Awareness Week from 12 to 18 May—focused this year on the theme of 'community'—the importance of accessible green spaces becomes evident. Community gardens serve as crucial outlets for individuals lacking private garden access, acting as social and therapeutic havens. Green strives to design gardens that cater to a wide audience, such as community and hospital gardens, aiming to make them physically and mentally accessible. His vision embraces breaking down cultural barriers that prevent underrepresented groups from utilising outdoor spaces.

Green's contributions to this cause can be seen in his design for The London Square Chelsea Pensioners Garden at this year’s RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Designed to tell the stories of Chelsea Pensioners, the garden pays homage to the Royal Hospital's 330-year heritage while providing a serene space for reflection across generations. “Access to green and natural space rooted in these types of gardens are crucial for communities,” he asserts.

His collaboration with the Royal Horticultural Society has resulted in numerous NHS wellbeing gardens spread across various locations, such as Woking Community Hospital and Walden Clinic. These projects prioritize usability and inclusivity, addressing the intimidation that some might feel in public spaces. “I want to make sure that the spaces are not only well designed but usable by a broad range of people,” he explains, underscoring the importance of clear pathways and visible entrances.

Green's garden designs are informed by both personal and cultural practices. His gold medal garden accolade from the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival featured a setting aimed at enhancing mental wellbeing. Additionally, his 2022 RHS Hampton Court Forest Bathing Garden, inspired by traditional Japanese practices, sought to initiate mindfulness through nature. Here, the concept of “forest bathing” promotes engagement with the senses and highlights how nature interacts with our mental state—a facet supported by ongoing research into the therapeutic effects of natural environments.

This growing recognition of nature's role in mental health extends beyond Green's work. Initiatives like 'Dose of Nature', a charity founded by Dr. Alison Greenwood in Kew, London, integrate nature therapy into mental health treatments. This programme utilises outdoor sessions to provide effective, affordable support for patients referred by GPs, reporting significant reductions in GP visits and improved mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, rural estates across the UK are adapting to wellness tourism, a trend that has surged post-Covid as more individuals seek refuge in nature. Estates like Wasing in Berkshire and Cabilla in Cornwall have developed into hubs for wellness retreats, recognising the economic and healing contributions of nature.

Extensive research supports the notion that green spaces can significantly enhance mental health. Studies reveal that simply spending time in natural settings can alleviate stress, improve mood, encourage social interaction, and enhance physical activity. The quality of these spaces, rather than their quantity, is crucial; well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing parks that foster social engagement can boost wellbeing substantially.

In urban environments, initiatives transforming vacant lots into green spaces have demonstrated marked improvements in mental health metrics among residents. A project in Philadelphia, for instance, resulted in a striking 41% reduction in depressive feelings, reinforcing the argument for investing in accessible, well-managed green areas.

As Green prepares for the RHS Chelsea and continues his work on the Greener Skills Garden at RHS Wisley—designed to inspire the next generation of horticulturists—the message remains clear: the power of nature is a critical component in cultivating mental health and wellbeing within our communities. As society increasingly acknowledges the significance of these experiences, the movement towards integrating nature into daily life will only gain momentum, providing a pathway to holistic health for many.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1
2. Paragraph 2
3. Paragraph 3
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 5
6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraph 7
8. Paragraph 8
9. Paragraph 9

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.prolandscapermagazine.com/2025/05/13/dave-green-on-the-importance-of-wellbeing-gardens-and-the-power-of-nature/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/a30e242b-c8a4-431a-8076-b9ce7aa18c3f> - This article discusses 'Dose of Nature,' a charity in Kew, London, that integrates nature therapy into mental health treatment. Founded by Dr. Alison Greenwood in 2018, the program offers outdoor therapy sessions and volunteer 'nature guides' to individuals referred by GPs for various mental health issues. The initiative has proven more affordable and effective than traditional therapies, with participants experiencing a 40% reduction in GP visits and improved mental health metrics. Supported by donations and NHS resources, 'Dose of Nature' continues to provide free transformative interventions for patients aged 16 to 96.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/ba2c3d35-7428-4e3b-9630-468498cdbbca> - This article explores how UK rural estates, such as Wasing Estate in Berkshire and Cabilla in Cornwall, are embracing wellness tourism as a sustainable business model. In response to the post-Covid surge in nature-seeking and wellbeing interest, these estates are transforming into hubs for spiritual and wellness retreats. Wasing Estate hosts festivals like Medicine Festival and Well Read, while Cabilla focuses on nature-based PTSD recovery and rainforest restoration, welcoming over 3,000 guests in four years. Despite initial investments and operational challenges, owners view themselves as custodians fostering human and ecological healing, highlighting the broader push to recognize nature’s economic contributions.
4. <https://time.com/4881665/green-spaces-nature-happiness/> - This article examines the positive effects of spending time in green spaces on mental health. Research indicates that exposure to nature provides stress relief, increases social interaction, encourages physical exercise, and soothes mental illness. The quality of green space is more important than quantity, with high-quality spaces being accessible, usable, aesthetically appealing, functional, and socially engaging. Well-maintained and safe public parks enhance well-being, while poorly maintained spaces do not. Engaging in activities that align with desired outcomes further enhances nature's mood-boosting effects.
5. <https://time.com/5341975/urban-greening-depression-study/> - This article reports on a study published in JAMA Network Open showing that transforming vacant lots into green spaces can significantly improve the mental health of urban residents. In Philadelphia, efforts to clean and green vacant lots led to a 41% decrease in depressive feelings and a 51% decrease in feelings of worthlessness among local residents. The initiative, costing around $1,600 per lot to implement and $180 annually to maintain, suggests that well-maintained green spaces play an important role in mental health by increasing social connections and helping individuals cope with stress.
6. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/cultivating-wellbeing-and-mental-health-through-gardening> - This article discusses the positive effects of gardening on mental health and well-being. Gardening activities provide physical exercise, which is known to improve mental health. Engaging in 'Green Exercise'—being physically active within a natural environment—has been shown to reduce stress and depression, and increase self-esteem and mood. Community and therapeutic gardening projects offer social contexts that can counteract feelings of loneliness and social isolation, providing opportunities to meet new people and develop support networks.