

Healing and Artful Landscape

Therapeutic horticulture and produce gardens for military Veterans

Being in a place like this [a healing garden] relaxes your mind. It puts you in an environment that you haven't been in for a while.¹

The Power of Gardens

The knowledge of the power of gardens and gardening to heal, to make one whole again, is not recent. Early observations of this power date back to the 1800s. Theories suggest an evolutionary or biological connection that promotes the overall health of the human species (see attached article). Introducing nature—in the form of gardens and green spaces in and around health facilities for long-term care and terminal patients—has proven to reduce the stress brought on by the disease or the patient's condition. In the last few years, innovative programs in farming and the development of therapeutic “natural” green spaces for Veterans with PTSD and other emotional stresses have proven beneficial for managing stress and even providing life-long pathways to a better quality of life. Other alternative pathways to healing from stress include art, yoga, music, and physical movement through nature.

The Healing and Artful Landscape at Rose Haven

The Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities (PRISC) is building a healing and artful landscape at Rose Haven, the reintegration home for female Veterans in Washington, NC. The approach to be taken at Rose Haven will develop programs that promote resilience and healing. Central to this strategy will be the development and sustainment of a therapeutic landscape featuring an intertwining of healing and produce gardens. These gardens will extend throughout the property and into an adjacent lot. Residents will maintain the gardens while also planting and harvesting the produce.



PRISC is working with Arts of the Pamlico to establish a Military Veteran Art Program. Veteran artists will help in the design of the landscape and contribute visual works of art to incorporate into the gardens. A historic barn in the back half of the property will be renovated to serve as a multipurpose facility that includes a gardening center.



The Healing Landscape and associated garden programs will act as a catalyst to help promote a stronger Veteran community in Washington and the surrounding county. Noted one Veteran involved in a gardening experience, “We all work together to get the job done, just like we used to.”

“...proven mental health benefits of gardening include: an improved sense of community, reduction of stress and anxiety, an improvement of alertness and cognitive abilities.”
~ Allison Moody

About – PRISC is a Washington, NC nonprofit 501(c)(3) that rehabilitates failing or vacant historic houses for use in residential programs for female Veterans and disabled Veterans and their families, many who suffer from physical or emotional trauma, or both. Restoring these historic houses provides homes and a place to rehabilitate their bodies, minds, and souls while also promoting community sustainability.

¹A Veteran involved in gardening, cited in Kreski, B. (2016). Healing and empowering veterans in a botanic garden. *Journal of Museum Education*, 41(2), 110–115. doi:10.1080/10598650.2016.1169734.



Healing Nature

By Robert Greene Sands
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It all comes back to dirt.

The former soldier was near broke, buffeted by the cruelties of transition from warrior to civilian, struggling with recovery from substance abuse, and whiplashed by several suicides among fellow vets. He had difficulty keeping a job and was isolated from others by chance and design, especially from the close support group that he counted on while serving. Seeking a step to begin the climb out of the morass of the present, he chose to plant that first seed to the next season of his life in the soil of an organic farm for veterans. Metaphors abound in this conversion, but the veteran simply went back to the basics of planting and harvesting, as he himself became a seed looking for the earth to nourish his own growth, while growing food for the local community. Healing is an equal opportunity adventure, searching for hooks on which to attach experience like a climber pounding pitons into a cliff to pull his body up its sheer face. Toiling in the sun and heat of summer to nurse those first few crops to a successful fall harvest was that first hook for the veteran. Without sounding too “out there”, he became part of the cycle of life and just one of the many species in the local ecology.

Evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson proposed a condition called *biophilia*, in which humans are innately and emotionally attached to the natural world. So far, I have introduced the role of the individual and the human community in successful healing—making oneself whole again. Both have the capacity to engage and provide means and ways to engage healing for veterans suffering from emotional and physical trauma. However, as Wilson has eloquently written, there is a role for nature in that healing process, and making oneself whole means seeking out the community that we often take for granted, or enter just to step outside to get from one place to another—the great outdoors. There is a reason why every year more people visit zoos, why those who can afford it build houses close to oceans and lakes, nestled next to or in forests or high in the mountains, why ecotourism has become a multibillion-dollar business. According to Wilson, we are already wired for this affection toward nature.

Studies show that being in the natural environment, complete with its unique sounds, smells, feel, and colors, and teaming with the diversity of life, can quiet or spell the expressions of emotional stress caused by mental disorders such as PTSD, depression, and addiction. This experience can also help in easing chronic pain and can provide a natural amphitheater to build supportive communities. There are nonprofits that use surfing, fly-fishing, scuba diving, and hiking to bring veterans together to seek the company of other vets, but these activities also help the vet become part of the larger community of nature to promote healing. For example, Combat Warriors Inc. hosts active military around the country to hunt and build community with other service members during weekend retreats. There are also retreats for women vets to “get away.” They spend time playing in nature, and for some, painting nature, while also convening among majestic pines, on isolated beaches, or high in the mountains, to reflect but also to forge community among those who share similar experiences and expressions of stress. Walter Reed National Military Medical Center built a two-acre “green road” through an undeveloped part of its campus, where patients and families traverse the paths that snake through streams and wind through a small forest of trees and other vegetation, while also meeting other patients. Just moving through nature and stopping to smell the roses can promote healing.

As the farmer Veteran discovered, working in nature to sustain or profit from the bounty of the harvest he helped produce also leads to healing. Learning new skills, watching efforts to literally grow pay off, gaining confidence to succeed in the task, all can translate to other goals and are critical to making oneself whole. Working with one's hands in mother earth accentuates and amplifies nature's power to heal.

The Pamlico Rose Institute and Arts of the Pamlico are coming together to build a healing and creative landscape and gardens at Rose Haven on 3rd Street, the reintegration home for female veterans. The purpose of the landscape is to provide the residents with sustainable nature right outside their back door: a place to meditate and reflect; a space to come together surrounded by trees, shrubs, flowers, and art; and a garden to seed and harvest and donate its fruits to food pantries. The gardens will also be a catalyst to bring other veterans in the community to enjoy the benefits of nature. And like the farmer Veteran, the gardens offer a chance to plant confidence and cultivate the success of achievement in the residents.

As I said, it all comes back to dirt.