

By Alyson Chorley

Thrive

is a small national charity that uses the therapeutic benefits of gardening to help people with a wide range of disabilities literally transform their lives.

Thrive

offers help to disabled people who want to garden at home, on an allotment or in a community setting, or who may want to access structured horticultural therapy programmes.

Working from two garden projects near Reading in Berkshire and in Battersea Park, London, horticultural therapists will go out into the community and help people garden in order to bring profound change to their lives. We help those who may have had a stroke, people with a learning disability, people with a visual impairment, those suffering from dementia or depression, in fact all kinds of disabilities.

Gardening is infinitely flexible and the results speak for themselves. People we've helped have noted improvements in their physical and mental health, made adjustments in their beliefs, attitudes or behaviours and have learnt new skills and abilities.

Working it out, an innovative Thrive programme run by Thrive's Battersea Garden Project, is equipping nearly 100 disabled Londoners with the vital skills and qualifications they need to find employment...



Tom Watson
Photo © Helen Jermyn

After Tom Watson, a European wakeboarding champion, was seriously injured in an horrific car accident when he was just 21 he was told he would probably never walk or talk again. But through his sheer determination and the support of *Working it out* Tom has been able to focus on rebuilding his physical stamina, improving his memory, concentration and communication skills. This is what James said: "My life was going nowhere and things got really bad – I thought about suicide. Coming to Thrive completely turned my life around. I made new friends and got all this support from people there, and I've got formal qualifications too, there's no way I'd be where I am today without Thrive."

Tom is a true *Working it out* success story. He has just completed the first stage of a work-based horticultural qualification and has left the programme for two jobs – one with a large landscape

gardening firm and another where he is working as an independent gardener for a large house in Ascot.

“My time at Thrive was brilliant. It got me concentrating, getting to know more people and understanding different disabilities. I now have a good friend Kevin that I met on the programme – he’s a blind gardener – I never thought I would I meet a blind gardener! “If it wasn’t for Thrive I might be stuck in a dead end job or doing nothing – with no communication skills and no strength. Even if you start off as not being that interested in gardening, being involved with Thrive is one of the best things you can do. You are never alone. Everyone – the therapists, the staff...they just do so much to help you,” he says.

Working it out is designed for people like Tom who really want to get a job but whose disability or mental ill health, makes it hard for them to access training and employment opportunities. Thrive can give them the support needed to develop necessary skills, explains Thrive’s Battersea Garden Project Manager Sue Stuart who set up the programme.



“When I joined Thrive in 2006 I met employers concerned about the skills shortage in London’s parks and green spaces. This immediately made me think of the standards and skills evident in the work of disabled Thrive gardeners at our Battersea Garden Project.

“I knew so many of them would love the opportunity to work and decided to develop a programme to bring employers and our gardeners together,” she explains.

Sue Stuart, Battersea Garden Project Manager, leading an all-important raffle!
Photo © Helen Jermyn

Thanks to funding from a charitable trust, the London Borough of Wandsworth and Lantra, the sector skills council for land based industries, a three-year pilot project was launched in Battersea Park in November 2009. *Working it out* is out is a development and training scheme in horticultural skills to give disabled people from six inner London boroughs a vocational qualification and skills needed to access employment opportunities. *Working it out* now has additional funding from London Councils and the European Social Fund to help 96 Londoners living with mental ill health.



Planting at Battersea. Photo© Helen Jermyn

People enrolled on *Working it out* attend the programme one day a week and work-in small groups of eight to ten with one-to-one support from a Thrive horticultural therapist. They work towards a City and Guilds horticulture qualification, have access to a work experience placement with an employer – usually as part of a parks maintenance team – and gain the skills they need to hold down a job. The process will last from six months to two years depending on the individual. It's an important element of *Working it out* that it's flexible and allows people to work at their own pace.

Since November 2009 88 people have benefited from *Working it Out* and the impact is clear. All participants have gained in confidence, most have experienced significant improvements in their communication and work skills, four have paid gardening jobs and three have moved on to do more training.

Thrive Chief Executive Nicola Carruthers is delighted with the programme's success. "An estimated 1.2 million disabled people in the UK want to work but are facing what sometimes seem like insurmountable obstacles such as lack of training, education and discrimination. *Working it out* is showing that with imagination, support and through key partnerships it is possible to make a difference and set important precedents."



HRH Princess Alexandra's visit to us at Battersea in October 2010, with therapist Chrissie Jones Nicci Carruthers., HRH, and Susan Stuart

Photograph © James Finlay

In 2006 Thrive commissioned a survey by Mintel entitled 'Levels of interest and participation in gardening among individuals with a disability'. It found that three out of four people said gardening has been beneficial to their health, one in three believe gardening has ongoing health benefits and one in five reported that gardening has helped them through a period of mental or physical ill health.

Current projects

Thrive opens its doors to people with all kinds of disabilities. However, a lot of people who come to us, or who we help in the community are part of a particular funded project.



Ade watering flowers at Trunkwell
Photo© Caroline Nieuwenhuys

At Trunkwell Gardens in Beech Hill. Gardening Choices, we run courses in training professionals in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture. There we have two new projects: Community Rural Gardening and Growing for Life using gardening to tackle isolation felt by people aged over 55 who may be living with mental health problems or other disabilities. Gardening Memories is for those who have dementia and Thrive works with them and their carers at home.

The Garden Gang started in 2010 and is a project open to disabled youngsters and their siblings to come to Thrive and enjoy environmental activities in the schools holidays.

Growing Options (across Thrive) is a development and vocational training programme for 14-16 year old with complex needs and Pathways is a programme for people with mental health issues which should lead to them becoming independent community volunteers.

Our gardens

The gardens at Thrive, at Beech Hill (near Reading) and in Battersea Park have all been designed with disability in mind. And whilst there are some raised beds we use planting that could help someone with a visual impairment and plants with scents that could help people with dementia remember things from their childhood.

There are many aspects to designing a garden to suit somebody with a disability: **The Secret Garden** at Thrive's headquarters at Beech Hill, near Reading has been designed for children with behavioural difficulties or special educational needs. And it is also used by older people with dementia. The design is simple, open, accessible and uncluttered, but at the same time enclosed, safe and secure.

Materials have been carefully chosen to avoid confusion, offer contrast and provide interest. There are raised beds and two stainless steel sculptures that offer tactile and visual interest. In 2011 Thrive will embark on another ambitious garden project, creating four new gardens at Thrive HQ: an old walled fruit garden will soon be transformed into a Garden Gallery holding five small gardens designed to suit the needs of specific disabilities



The Hearts and Mind Garden by Vanessa Adorni

The **Hearts and Minds Garden**, designed by Vanessa Adorni, (left and below) is for people recovering from a stroke or heart attack. This garden will tackle the effects of stroke including partial paralysis, reduced mobility, limited vision, loss of sensory capacity, and physical weakness using a design which encourages gentle exercise to recover health, strength, stamina and co-ordination.



The **Just for Fun Garden** is for 14-19 year old children with special educational need and will provide opportunities for children to try gardening and growing for themselves and to experience nature, It will be a colourful and playful space which will include a social area, a wildlife area, and a grow and eat area, while the **Out of Sight Garden** is for people with sight loss. Paths will be wide, level and straight and corners will be marked with landmarks. Any barriers and obstacles will need to be highly visible, the textures underfoot will be important for gardeners to discern changes of direction or height and plants will be chosen for scent, sound and texture.

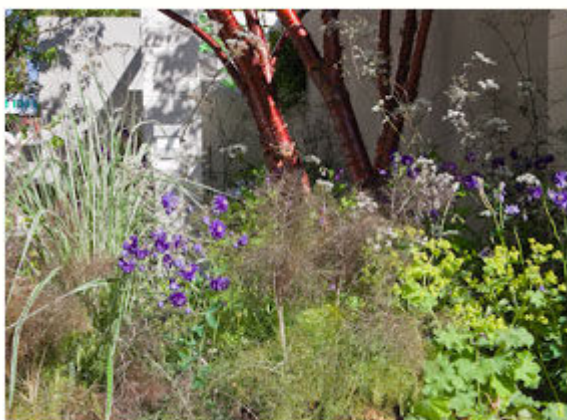
The Journey will be an uplifting garden for people recovering from a mental illness particularly depression. This garden will promote well-being, stimulation of the senses, creativity, and inspire physical activity to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety and give a feeling of accomplishment and direction. Indeed, we think Thrive is living proof that anyone can have a fashionable and contemporary garden that still ticks all the boxes for practicality and access.

(In the March upload of www.gardensandpeople.co.uk we will be featuring all the designers involved in the Garden Gallery Project)



Our award-winning Chelsea Garden is now at Thrive's HQ so visitors will be able to see it again during our open days in 2011. **The Unexpected Gardener** was designed by Jo Thompson (see profile below) and born out of Thrive principles. It won a gold medal and was named best urban garden at Chelsea 2010. **The Unexpected Gardener** shows how age or disability need not mean the end to gardening or a compromise to good design.

Photo © Helen Jermyn



Top garden designer Andrew Fisher Tomlin, who is also a Thrive trustee, said...

"The gardens at Thrive in Beech Hill are superb for people with disabilities - and the Garden Gallery is such an exciting project which takes this concept even further.

"I am delighted to be involved with a such an inspiring, forward thinking charity which gets great results. "

It's no secret that 2011 will be a tough year for small and medium sized charities....

Small charities like Thrive are most at risk in this economic climate as most of the money is donated to the larger, familiar, household charity names. Thrive is the only national charity of its kind; last year we helped over 7,000 people including 300 at our own gardens. We really need your help so that together we can continue to help disabled people improve their lives through gardening this year, next year and for many years to come.

With your support we can make 2011 another positive and exciting year. We are continuing all our core programmes and we are also extending our support with two new community based projects targeting rural isolation amongst disabled people.

Thrive staff are always deeply moved by donations we receive. If you have given to Thrive before, thank you, if you would like to do more or perhaps something different in 2011 to help Thrive, just get in touch and we'll show you how. If you can organise a fundraising event for Thrive, we'd be happy to support you. Please do get in touch with our fundraiser [Sue Tiplady](#) on 0118 988 5688.

[Come and see us in 2011!](#)

Thrive at [Trunkwell Gardens](#), Beech Hill, near Reading, will open its garden gates to the public four times this year as part of the NGS open garden scheme.

Dates for your diary are [Saturday April](#) to 4pm; [Sunday July 10](#) 2pm to 4.30pm (where our first garden in the Garden Gallery should be open - the rehab garden) ; [Sunday July 17](#) 2pm to 4.30pm and [Saturday September 17](#) 11am to 4pm. Costs are £3.50 for adults £1 for children. There will be plant sales, refreshments, home-made goodies and garden tours. The two Saturdays will also include stalls from a host of local food and craft folk.

At [Battersea](#), why not visit us as part of London Open Squares Weekend on [June 11 and 12](#) 11am and 4pm. at The Herb Garden in Battersea Park. Sample some delicious home-made refreshments and join in the fun for grown ups and children at our beautiful and award-winning Herb Garden in Battersea Park. By taking part in the tombola, raffle and everything else on offer you'll be helping to raise the funds we urgently need to support our work.



THE HERB GARDEN. BATTERSEA

Photo © Caroline Ames



Photo © Helen Jermyn

And we are delighted to be the beneficiary from [the Frogmore Open Garden Event on May 18](#), courtesy HRH The Queen. Please do come and see these fantastic, rarely opened gardens and support Thrive at the same time. More details nearer the time on our website.

For details please look at the events page on the Thrive website at www.thrive.org.uk.

Visit www.thrive.org.uk

the website www.carryongardening.co.uk offers practical tips and advice for people who want to carry on gardening with a disability.

DESIGNER PROFILE: Jo Thompson ~ designer of *The Unexpected Gardener*



The brief was to design a garden for the older, stylish mature gentleman. Someone who loves his urban garden but is finding it slightly more challenging physically than in the past. Features include posts at different heights to lean on whilst gardening and allow easier access, a non-slip gravel surface for increased stability underfoot, the use of LG Hi-Macs, a new material incorporated into the planters and posts to improve grip, easy maintenance, but stylish plants like the new Jamie Roo Iris, a seating area for entertaining, a water feature and multi-stemmed Prunus serrula trees to create cool shade and a garden canopy.

"Thrive's focus is on using gardening to help transform people's lives. It is incredibly heartening seeing this garden in situ at Thrive's headquarters and seeing it being used by the people it was designed for."

After a degree in Italian at University College London, Jo Thompson spent 10 years teaching in London, before re-training in garden design at the English Gardening School. Since then she has been working on projects throughout the UK and increasingly, overseas.

Jo has developed a unique style, blending strong lines with soft planting, experimenting with colour where the client is trusting or brave enough. Amongst her current projects are the rooftop gardens of the new combined headquarters of the London Wildlife Trust and National Youth Theatre, an interesting and challenging client combination.

Jo speaks about garden design on invitation, and is a guest lecturer at the London College of Garden Design. She writes a regular feature for Green Spaces magazine on design in public spaces, a blog for Horticultural Week and contributes to a number of gardening articles.

<http://www.jothompson-garden-design.co.uk/>