

GARDENS for CARE

From concept to completion....

Case Study:

THE 'TREE of LIFE GARDEN'

ST. RICHARD'S HOSPICE, Worcester

by Pershore College & Carol Smith, CS Garden Designs.



THE PROJECT HISTORY – CONCEPTION.

The garden came into being as the result of a long held dream of Marilyn Peachey – the fund-raising director for St. Richards' Hospice, whom had seen a metallic tree in another hospice garden, some months before, and in celebration of St. Richards.25th year, wished to create this type of space and fund raising initiative.

Circumstances conspired, it was Feb 2009, two months before the Malvern Spring Garden Show and the Pershore College, Head of Horticulture, Mr. Tony Davies, who also had a hidden desire to build a garden using Celtic astrology as the concept; asked Carol Smith, part time lecturer at Pershore College and free lance garden designer, if she would accompany him, to an initial meeting with the hospice, to discuss the possibility of working with them to exhibit a show garden at the forthcoming Malvern Show.

The meeting had a positive outcome, whereby agreement was reached that the garden would be called 'The Tree of Life Garden' with a silver metallic tree as its focal point, it would be designed and project managed by Carol, and after the show, rebuilt at the hospice for the patients, relatives and staff to use, an additional bonus benevolently proposed by Pershore.

This second phase of the project was completed in June 2010, the garden being given a beautiful blessing ceremony, by the hospice chaplain, and later an official opening ceremony which was well attended by the media, governors and distinguished public figures connected to the hospice, and Pershore College.

CAROL SMITH continues the story.....

THE BRIEF:

When working on a project such as this, it is crucial that the needs, wishes and desires of the users are identified and a definitive list collated. This of course, must address the varied needs of the users; which can be grouped 'as less able bodied' perhaps a wheelchair user, to the able bodied that are carers, relatives or staff. The needs of these user groups can be condensed into: *" the need for a private area where one can leave feeling relieved and re-energised, physically and spiritually refreshed and physically, psychologically and emotionally in a 'better place' - prepared to continue to deal with the difficult life situation being faced, which ultimately, could be the death of a loved one."*

There are of course, certain, more practical requirements of the garden, from a construction perspective, such as the provision of wheelchair access, seating and maintenance issues – which the design should also address and provide for. The design should fulfil both the aesthetic and functional requirements of a garden, as with all design projects.

WORKING WITH THE MEDICAL STAFF:

I worked with the medical staff from a distance, by talking with Marilyn, whom as fund raising director was heading up the project. Talk about the garden, in an informal manner, had been going on for many months and through this period a picture had emerged, as to the nature of the garden, which would fulfil all of the user wishes; this was described to me by Marilyn.

As a designer, one could gather this information by distributing a questionnaire to all, however this process is fallible – in that not everybody completes and returns the document; it would also, be an extremely time consuming process to collate the results into a final list. Therefore, I would suggest that there is a definitive condition of the garden, which is to fulfil both aesthetic and functional requirements, the decisions relating to both, will be influenced by basic design principles and functionality.

BENEFITS & EFFECTS for the USERS.: Relationship.

Spiritual.

It is a well known fact, that being amongst nature has an almost immediate beneficial effect to our sense of well-being.

A hospice garden should be a place, which not only serves to enable people to re-connect with 'the life force' in nature and themselves, but to provide an understanding of the process which they are experiencing, whether facing the end of their life, or being witness to this, as a carer or relative.

We think of death as final and an ending, however, nature reminds us that there is a continuous cycle in motion, within which death gives rise to birth, just as the passing of winter makes way for spring- the season which reminds us of rebirth and new beginnings. By sitting in the private space, and observing this phenomenon of nature, we are given an understanding of this, thereby empowering us to accept the process we are in, and with that acceptance, comes peace.

Remembrance.

It is important to the bereaved, that their loved one is not forgotten, not just to themselves, but also to others.



The silver tree, the gardens' focal point, acts as a reminder, by providing the opportunity to purchase and engrave a silver leaf, with the lost ones personal details. This, is given further significance, in that every six months a 'leaf ceremony' is held in the garden, led by the hospital chaplain, in which the leaves are blessed and hung on the tree, to remain for six months, at which time they can be reclaimed to take home and treasure.

This process provides a period of time in which the hospice and garden can be revisited. The visit provides a sense of re-connection as the tree with its light reflecting leaves, reminds them of their loved one.

The silver tree at the Malvern Show

Children – it has been found that the garden plays a strong, positive role in the bereavement process for children. They find the bright shiny, metallic tree visually exciting to look at, as some of the leaves move in the breeze, bouncing light around the surrounding area, and make a tinkling sound, which further delights the children; therefore their remembrance visits to the garden are connected with pleasure, not sadness

The Physical Effects.

Interacting with nature is a powerful way to relieve stress and tension, whatever its cause. It is a well proven fact, that focussing on our breathing takes the mind away from all its constant chatter – usually negative stuff! and redirects its energy to the body; it is an almost, automatic response to take a deep breath and release it when we take ourselves outside, thereby placing our attention on the physical, in us and around us, results in a sense of calm and relaxation.

When observing nature, whether that be flower colours or the gentle movement of trees in the breeze, we are reminded of the beauty in the world, reconnecting us to a sense of well being, rather than doom and gloom.

When planning the planting for the hospice garden, the aim was to provide subtle colour – colour that is too bright will create a sense of tension, movement for increased visual appeal, and seasonal interest so that the garden can fulfil its role throughout the year.

There is a rill, water feature in the garden, this was originally to fulfil the concept for the show garden, however, it was decided to keep the water, despite potential maintenance issues, for its properties of additional interest, attracting wildlife and the reflective qualities of its still, not moving water which can be distracting.



The garden at the Show

Maintenance.

The major criterion to be fulfilled is that of Low maintenance planting. One of the wonderful things about the hospice, is the number of volunteers that contribute to its function, the garden was more likely to be tended by garden enthusiast volunteers, on an irregular basis, rather than regular visits by a professional gardener. Therefore the overriding requirement of the planting is that it is tough, hardy, and mostly evergreen so that the garden has a constant form, which is supported by a lesser proportion of herbaceous planting, which brings additional spring through summer interest. The volunteers take a personal sense of pride within their chosen role, therefore the garden enthusiast volunteer may wish to donate plants to the garden, becoming a part of its development, therefore space, ideally amongst the existing plants, should be left, for this to occur.

VIEWS of the USERS.

Patients:

On speaking to a senior nurse she reported that the garden is used by day hospice patients for 'quiet times'. These are spiritual sessions, held in the garden by the hospice chaplain, where the focus is upon reflection, contemplation and connecting to the nature loving/ spiritual aspect of the participants. They had commented that the garden was beautiful to look at and they experienced a strong re-connection with their spiritual side and sense of calm, whilst sitting in the garden during these sessions . A sense of community spirit between the patients, relatives and staff, students, contractors, lecturers and all, whom had been involved, had developed whilst the garden was being built and planted. This provided a conversation point between all that followed the gardens creation.

Relatives.

Have commented on how important and poignant an experience the 'leaf ceremony' was to them, and how sitting in the garden for the ceremony was so beneficial on all levels – uplifting, strengthening and providing a sense of closure, whereby the memory of the lost one is very positive, of a silver, dancing leaf on a silver tree, within a lovely garden.

Staff.

The comments by staff were uniform, in that all enjoyed the garden for the sense of calm and tranquillity it provides. A visually beautiful space where each can sit, reflect and leave any tensions and sadness behind them, a space that somehow reconnects them to the beauty and positive aspects of life rather than the negative.



The garden transferred to the hospice grounds

I believe.

The silver tree plays a major role in changing the focus from negative to positive, as one cannot help but smile and think 'how lovely' when looking at it; it is even more attractive when sunlight reflects off the leaves and creates small, dancing pools of light around the garden – in fact this was one, amongst several things, that attracted people, to the garden at the show.

I have found this a fantastic project to have been so involved in. It continues to, and I'm sure, always will, give me an immense amount of job satisfaction, that a show garden went on, to continue its life in another place, to provide so much respite, comfort and re-connect people with the beauty and positive in life, just by being itself – nature.



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