



**ARRCBC**  
ACTION FOR REFORM OF  
**RESIDENTIAL CARE BC**

# Quality of Life SERIES

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## Connections to Nature

### How Gardens in Long-term Care Support Quality of Life

#### *A “Breath of Fresh Air”*

For many people, quality of life and wellbeing is strongly connected to being outside, in nature. Some of us take our first cup of coffee outdoors to watch the sunrise. For others, stepping out into the garden at the end of a long day reduces stress. We enjoy bird calls and tree frogs chirping, watch butterflies, smell the roses, touch fuzzy leaves, and smile as we watch squirrels play on the lawn. Unfortunately, many residents in long-term care do not have easy access to a safe and accessible space that provides these benefits.

#### *Benefits of Getting Outside*

A number of studies have shown that being out in nature benefits residents in long-term care facilities by reducing stress, anxiety and depression, improving sleep, fostering self-esteem, and providing restorative experiences. Getting outside gives some people a break from institutional noises and smells, and is essential for residents who had, and may still have, a strong connection to nature.

Think of those who grew up on a farm or worked as tree planters. Those who retired to B.C. to be closer to nature. And those who grew vegetables and berries in the back yard or on their patio, and for whom harvesting produce was, and can still be, a source of gratitude and pride. And let’s think about people whose identity included a life-long commitment to helping the planet, inspiring them to garden organically and provide shelter for Mason bees.

For many residents, being outdoors can make them feel free. For some, listening to water in the fountain creates a sense of peace. Others may enjoy learning a new skill such as planting herbs. Quality of life can also be enhanced by sitting on the patio, enjoying a cup of tea while visiting and reminiscing with friends and loved ones. Getting outside provides exercise, and simple joys like feeling the sun on one’s face or watching birds playing in the birdbath. A friend who works in Recreation recently commented that “It is hard to be in a bad mood when you’re outside listening to birds sing”.

Outdoor space can be taken for granted because most of us can get a “breath of fresh air” any time we want. But residents in many long-term care facilities face challenges to accessing the well-

known benefits of nature. Garden spaces need to be safe and accessible. Staff must be available to assist. The weather must cooperate.

### *Turning Passion into Action*

If your facility doesn't have a safe, accessible and beautiful outdoor space, talk to the Administrator, your Family Council or Recreation staff - connect with others who are interested in creating a plan to provide or revitalize a garden.

There are many ways to make that plan manageable. Could garden costs be reduced by partnering with a nursery in your community? Ask if your local university would consider sending horticulture students and an instructor to build and plant wheelchair height raised beds and work with residents. Would Rotary members or the Master Gardeners group in your town volunteer some time to help maintain the garden? How about weekly summer tea parties in the garden? Maybe a Gardening Club in the winter where residents could thumb through seed catalogues? And of course, bus trips to botanical settings like Milner, Van Dusen and Butchart gardens are always popular.

Outdoor space is a simple and easy way to significantly improve quality of life for long-term care residents. ARRC wishes everyone "happy gardening" as we plan ways to expand outdoor programs. This is such important work - residents, families, staff and the birds will thank you!

### Further Reading

Garden Now, Live Longer. Dr. Angela Hunt. 2019.

<https://kihc.ca/garden-now-live-longer/>

Understanding the Barriers and Enablers to Using Outdoor Spaces in Nursing Homes: A Systematic Review. *Gerontologist*, May 2020. M. van den Berg et al.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228458/>

Designing Gardens to Attract Activity. A Primer for Elder Care Communities. Margaret P. Calkins, PhD, EDAC, FGSA IDEAS Institute. 2023.

<https://www.ipfcc.org/resources/Designing-Gardens-to-Attract-Activity.pdf>

Residents' use and perceptions of residential care facility gardens: A behaviour mapping and conversation study. *International Journal of Older People Nursing*, March 2020. E. Dahlkvist, RN, Degree of Licentiate of Medical Science et al.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7027578/>

Freeman S, Banner D, Labron M, Betkus G, Wood T, Branco E, Skinner K. "I see beauty, I see art, I see design, I see love." Findings from a resident-driven, co-designed gardening program in a long-term care facility. *Health Promot Chronic Dis Prev Can.* 2022;42(7):288-300. <https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.42.7.03>