



Therapeutic Horticulture Evaluation Report

Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre Gardening Programs

This report was completed by Masters of Social Work student undertaking a 500 hour placement with Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre over July- August 2025.

Program Introduction

Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre has run Therapeutic Horticulture in the community garden for more than five years, where community members can engage in gardening activities, learn new skills, and build meaningful social connections. It is an inclusive program welcoming people from diverse backgrounds and abilities, supporting both volunteers and students through urban farming practices.

Evaluation Method

Between July and August, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants involved in the garden project. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 82, including volunteers and students. The interviews explored participants' backgrounds, motivations, experiences, and perceived impacts of their involvement in the community garden.

Evaluation Data

We invited participants to rate their experience from four aspects, including how the community garden influenced their physical health, mental health, social connection and connection with nature. Below is their average score (1 = not at all, 2=slightly, 3= moderate, 4= quite a bit, 5 = a great deal)

	Physical wellbeing	Mental Wellbeing	Social Connection	Connection with Nature
Gardener 1	3	5	4	3
Gardener 2	4	5	5	4
Gardener 3	3	4	4	4
Gardener 4	5	5	4	4
Gardener 5	5	5	5	5
Gardener 6	4	5	5	5
Gardener 7	5	5	5	5
Gardener 8	5	3	4	4
Average Score	4.25	4.63	4.5	4.25

From this data, we can see that participants consistently report high satisfaction with the garden's benefits across four key aspects, particularly for mental well-being and social connection.

Benefits and Testimonials

1. Mental Well-being Benefits

Mental health emerged as the area with the greatest positive impact. Participants consistently described the garden as a place of comfort, restoration, and emotional balance.

a. Stress Relief and Therapeutic Value

The garden offered a much-needed break from everyday stress and provided a space for emotional release and mental reset. Many saw it as a space for emotional release and mental reset.

"I find it relaxing. It's like therapy for me. I come in here and I know I'm going to have a good day, and when I leave, I feel relaxed." – Gardener 5

"It's good to come down here and just try to tune out for a while." – Gardener 4

"It helps settle that and it calms me down." – Gardener 2

"Working with your hands and with other people is therapeutic." – Gardener 7

b. Better Mood

Participants reported feeling happier and more positive after joining the program. For some, it became the highlight of their week.

“Spending time in the garden really makes me feel calm and happy.” – Gardener 6

“That one day a week is beautiful — it makes me want to get out of bed.” – Gardener 7

“Gardening is very calming. And when you see the results of what you’ve done, it’s very satisfying. And it makes you feel good.” – Gardener 8

c. Reducing Social Isolation

The garden fostered friendships and eased loneliness. People who once had little social contact now had regular conversations and shared activities.

“From the moment I joined the group, I never felt lonely.” – Gardener 6

“I moved from being socially isolated to chatting regularly with other adults.” – Gardener 5

“I think community garden promotes mental health through collaborative decision-making and attracts like-minded, reasonable people who are open to listening and learning from each other.” – Gardener 1

“We are not very social, but this garden gives us a reason to go out, it’s good to come down here and just try to tune out from that for a while. It’s also good to be around other people.” – Gardener 4

2. Social Connection

The garden proved to be a catalyst for building friendships and community ties across different age groups and backgrounds.

a. Relaxing Environment

The outdoor setting and shared activities created a natural, comfortable atmosphere for conversation and connection. Participants found it easier to talk and get to know each other while working together on garden tasks.

“I feel a real sense of equity, respect, and understanding when I interact with the other participants, it is easier to connect with people when we’re working side by side on something.” – Gardener 6

“People often talk more when they’re outside than they would in a classroom, which some people might find overwhelming, it gives us a common topic and it’s less awkward. It just feels more natural.” – Gardener 5

“In the garden, it feels more natural and relaxed to talk and easier to make friends in community-based events.” – Gardener 2

b. Building Friendships

Many participants developed genuine friendships that extended beyond garden sessions. The shared experience of working toward common goals created strong bonds between people who might not have met otherwise.

“Sometimes you can find people became ‘very good friends’ through shared gardening activities.” – Gardener 1

“We’ve become friends outside the group; we often just ring each other to chat about everything and anything.” – Gardener 5

“Here you find like-minded people who enjoy the same things. At home, it’s just you. In the garden, it’s teamwork. That’s how friendships start.” – Gardener 7

“The reason why I join in the community garden, I’d say it’s about 60% social and 40% gardening. I do enjoy the gardening part too, but the socialisation definitely plays a bigger role.” – Gardener 3

c. Intergenerational Connections

The garden successfully brought people of different ages and backgrounds together, creating valuable opportunities for mutual learning and understanding.

“It’s really rewarding to meet these young people and watch them grow and improve over time. It helps me become more tolerant and understanding of all sorts of people.” – Gardener 3

d. Valuing Relationships

Participants developed genuine care and affection for their fellow gardeners, with many expressing how much they valued these new relationships in their lives.

“Here, people care, And I think that I would be sad to not see the people. Even though I’m not socialising with them outside of work, I still find it— I look forward to seeing them.” – Gardener 1

“I really miss people when we have breaks. I even told my niece, ‘I can’t wait to go back to school,’ because it’s where I learn and connect with people.” – Gardener 7

3. Physical Well-being

Although physical benefits scored lower than other areas, they remained significant for participants' overall health and fitness. Participants engaged in various physical tasks like digging, planting, and lifting, gaining exercise without the pressure.

“I’m more physically active now. I even lost some weight later. It’s strengthening muscles too.” – Gardener 5

“Coming here has been more physical, which I've enjoyed. It's improved my stamina, helped my lungs, and given me more fresh air.” – Gardener 7

“As you get older, getting out in the fresh air, doing something you enjoy with people you like—that's really important.” – Gardener 3

“it's good for your physical health because you're being active.” –Gardener 8

4. Environmental Consciousness

Gardening deepened participants' environmental awareness and appreciation for nature. The hands-on experience of growing plants and working with soil gave participants a deeper understanding of natural processes and environmental interconnections.

“Gardening has made me more sensitive and aware of the environment and the plants around me.” – Gardener 6

“I am very much aware of the importance of the environment as a whole, and how we're part of it. I believe we should be doing as much as we can to preserve it.” – Gardener 3

“This experience expanded my knowledge about bees, insects, and nature, and I would like to enhance the garden's biodiversity.” – Gardener 4

“Gardening has given me a better perspective on how to treat living things and what's efficient. Now I've gained a deeper respect for how we treat the environment. It's a nurturing thing too.” – Gardener 5

5. Skill Development and Learning

The garden provided continuous learning opportunities, from technical gardening skills to soft skills.

a. Knowledge and Skills

Participants gained practical knowledge about composting, soil health, seasonal planting, and plant identification. This learning gave them confidence to apply these skills in their own home gardens and sparked ongoing interest in horticulture.

“Gardeners are always learning, and you learn by doing. If you stay open to other people's suggestions and ideas, there's always something to pick up.” – Gardener 3

“You can always pick up little hints and tips by talking with people who have a great depth of gardening knowledge or doing new things.” – Gardener 4

“I've always loved gardening, but there's always room to improve. Working with others gives me new ideas.” – Gardener 7

b. Confidence

Successfully growing plants and completing garden projects boosted participants' self-confidence and sense of accomplishment.

“I feel pride that I get to see them grow up well and healthy. This process also boosts my confidence.” – Gardener 2

“I've learned a lot of practical gardening skills through volunteering in the community garden. Because of everything I've learned, I now feel confident trying similar things at home. This experience has really sparked my interest in gardening.” – Gardener 6

6. Community Impact

The benefits of the garden extended well beyond direct participants to the broader community.

a. Food Security and Access

The garden contributed to local food security by providing fresh produce for community meals, affordable vegetables for sale.

“We've been able to feed people with the garden produce, and they've taken things up to café as well. The tomatoes we grew were a big hit—they even went into school lunches.” – Gardener 5

“Chemicals can make you sick. Growing your own food with organic chemicals is healthier, better for the environment, and can also reduce financial pressure.” – Gardener 7

b. Broader Engagement

The garden attracted positive attention from community members and visitors, serving as a visible symbol of community cooperation and environmental stewardship.

“I think the people who visit the neighbourhood centre appreciate the garden, even if they're not directly involved, they still make the connection with where some of the food comes from, and it's a positive thing for them.” – Gardener 3

“The garden's not just about growing—it brings socialising, and I think that's fantastic. That's exactly what we want.” – Gardener 5

“I think from a social point of view, it’s been very good, it’s a social gathering of community members with a common interest, producing food for our kitchen.” – Gardener 8

c. Enjoyment

The garden brought joy and beauty to the community space, creating a peaceful environment that people enjoyed visiting and experiencing.

“When they walk around the garden beds — I think they admire it. Just seeing it brings people a bit of joy.” – Gardener 2

“And people come and go, but they enjoy the space because it’s relaxed. That’s good for mental health and social connection too.” – Gardener 5

Recommendations

All participants were willing to recommend this program to others, with specific suggestions:

“I’d recommend it to anyone. Fresh air, meeting people, getting out of the house, feeling more positive about yourself.” – Gardener 3

“I think we need to encourage that more and give them more space. It’s fabulous for mental health, and the socialisation is a big benefit too.” – Gardener 7

“I’d encourage them to just come along and try it — and emphasise that it’s not just weeding. People might be surprised at what they’ll learn.” – Gardener 1

“You’re not only contributing to the community — you’re also gaining so much from the experience yourself. There are benefits in so many ways. If you’re looking to make your life more interesting and have more fun, I’d really recommend giving it a go.” – Gardener 6

“No one’s going to be in your face. It’s quite low when we’re outside. If you want to talk, you can talk. If you don’t, don’t feel the pressure to. You can just do, it’s all about that freedom.” – Gardener 5

“It’s a very useful thing to be able to do when you’re working with your hands and plants. It gives you an understanding of nature.” – Gardener 8

Conclusion

The BNC therapeutic horticulture program demonstrates significant positive impacts across all measured dimensions, with particularly strong benefits for mental well-being and social connection. The program successfully creates an inclusive, supportive environment where participants of diverse ages and backgrounds can develop both

practical skills and meaningful relationships while contributing to their broader community. The garden serves as more than a space for growing plants, it functions as a catalyst for personal growth, community building, and environmental stewardship, validating the therapeutic value of horticulture as an intervention for enhancing quality of life across diverse populations.