

2018 Festival of Learning Nominated Tutor

I was delighted to be nominated for teaching 'Learning Well' gardening courses for mental health and wellbeing across west and mid Kent and Medway. The programme brought community learning to people who have not previously accessed Adult Education services and I worked with groups ranging from a mental health support group who meet regularly to a housing association new community garden project.

Gardening is a hobby that is, at the very least, familiar and available to people from all ages and backgrounds even where individuals have never picked up a trowel and do not own a garden. This makes it an ideal medium through which to deliver the benefits of community learning to support mental wellbeing. These include reduction in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, increased self-esteem and confidence, social contact and inclusion; and a sense of belonging and personal achievement.

Most learners said that they would continue gardening after the course; for some this was a new experience, for others it reinforced interest and confidence to resume or continue gardening living with a life changing health condition. Where groups had access to a garden and would remain together after the course they intended to maintain the area and particularly to grow fresh vegetables and herbs, building confidence and self-esteem through caring for plants and seeing their achievements. The experience of learning and working together was important too, particularly for the learners living with mental health support needs. They reported that it made them feel 'part of the team', key for people who often feel isolated from society. Making a contribution to their community also featured and learners enjoyed working in a garden that other people could benefit from.

Some learners said that they found working with plants on the course relaxing and helped them to be calm. Others were specific that the practical work required concentration blocking out thoughts of their day to day challenges without itself being stressful.

There is no doubt that Social and Therapeutic Horticulture is a most rewarding part of my work.

