

# Get well soon!

## Using plants to assist in rehabilitation

Keen gardeners have long known the therapeutic value of their favourite pastime. But now at Austin Health's Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre, the garden has become as much a part of getting well as physiotherapy is.

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One person can make a big difference, and to the patients at Austin Health's Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre in Kew, Victoria, Steven Wells is more than just a nurse or horticultural therapist, he is a garden angel.

From a few rough sketches, donated plants and recycled pots and pickets, the horticultural therapy program and associated garden was born. It is here that Steven has been able to combine his training and knowledge to enhance the lives of all who visit the Acquired Brain Injury Unit.

### From small ideas big things grow

Using plants for therapy is not a new idea. Owning and tending to plants has been shown to reduce stress, give people a purpose and help with all manner of conditions from old age to chronic fatigue. But instead of putting a solitary plant in the communal area of the hospital as a token gesture, Steven took this one step further: he thought that the patients at the Acquired Brain Injury Unit would benefit from all manner of gardening activities, cleverly combined to create a comprehensive horticultural therapy program.

From what started five short years ago with just a handful of preloved pots, the garden has become the jewel in health services provider Austin Health's crown. Steven says patients involved in the rehabilitation program have shown marked improvement in behaviour, attitude and wellbeing. Even the professional medical staff admit to feeling uplifted by having something beautiful to admire on their way to and from work.



**Above:** Level pathways, contemplative resting places and seasonal flowering plants are vital to the therapeutic garden.

**Left:** A water feature in front of a gabion wall invites birds into the garden, while a handcrafted Dragonfly is a permanent fixture.

**Right:** Deciduous trees highlight the seasons while architectural plants, such as Liriopes, potted Cycads, *Philodendron 'Xanadu'* and *Cordyline australis* provide texture and anchor the garden throughout the changing year.









Succulents with vibrant colour contrasts and extraordinary foliage variation look good all year round. They're also a great choice for their low water needs, ease of growth and unusual textures.



## Planting for stimulation

Forget any preconceptions that horticultural therapy is about growing medicinal plants. Plants grown at the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre are selected for their colour, texture and fragrance. Plants for horticultural therapy must stimulate the senses. They should be able to be touched, smelt and enjoyed from close up and far away.

### Seeing is believing

Some patients are unable to venture into the garden, so visual stimuli are important. For them, the garden must allow them to enjoy the change of seasons from their beds or rooms. They need to be able to see the passing of time while enjoying the transformation that the garden undergoes as each week or month passes. They can watch as the fruit ripens on the Apple Tree, the flowers bud and bloom, and the deciduous trees move through their myriad colours, all directly outside their hospital windows.

### Touchy feely

For others, the garden is a tactile place where they want to be able to touch and smell the plants. They want to interact with nature and the physical world again without judgement or prejudice. They enjoy the familiar fragrance of Lemon-scented Verbena and Rosemary, the flavour of fresh vegetables and the hands-on experience of helping the garden grow.



**Above:** Signs help visitors navigate the gardens so that they can enjoy all that this healing space has to offer. A small vegetable garden also provides patients with fresh produce and wonderful seasonal experiences.

**Below:** This fountain gives patients a place where they can feel running water on their hands as well as enjoying its sound.



*“Emotionally the garden has been a refuge. A calm place for therapies and visits from my family and friends, it reconnects my rehab world and real world in a supportive and positive way, speeding my recovery.”*

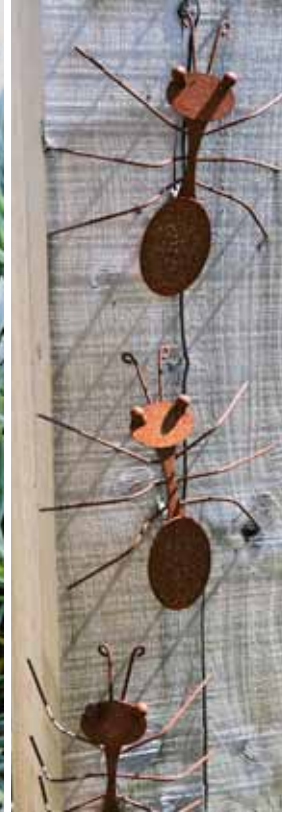
*- Program participant*





Private seating areas with wheelchair access are important for respite, privacy and solitude.





**Far left:** *Aeonium arboreum* 'Green Lady'. **Centre left:** With similar tones, *Senecio* or Chalk Sticks and *Echeveria* succulents work well in the same pot. *Echeveria* grows up towards the light in a roseate form, while Chalk Sticks drape over the edge like so many pieces of tumbling chalk. **Left, below & bottom left:** Corroding metal sculptures add a constantly evolving elemental quality to the garden. **Far left centre:** The rusting steel mesh of the gabion wall adds a grid of colour. **Bottom right:** Ceramic balls take the place of eggs in this disused bird's nest and are used for tactile therapy.



### ABOUT THE DESIGNER

Steven Wells has been a nurse for 20 years. Taking a break from this career, he studied horticulture at Burnley College in Victoria before returning to nursing. He has subsequently combined his talents at the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre, where he co-designed the garden and now runs the Horticultural Therapy program and practises clinical nursing. The gardens at Austin's Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre are sponsored by Neutrog and Amgrow and are expanded and improved with the generous donations received from the Friends of Austin Health. For more information visit [austin.org.au/friends](http://austin.org.au/friends)

