

How does your garden grow? For cancer patients, small gardens could bring big benefits

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A 'Garden Bowl' is part of a study examining whether the benefits of nature can be reaped from a small indoor garden. Credit: Dr Ceri Phelps, University of Wales Trinity St David, Swansea, Wales

The benefits of health nature-based activities are well-known; many programmes encourage cancer patients to tend gardens to improve psychological health. But nature isn't always accessible, particularly for cancer patients who are frail or disadvantaged. (And it can take a lifetime of gardening experience to find joy in a garden in winter.)

In the latest article in *ecancermedicalscience*, a team of researchers led by Dr Ceri Phelps of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea, Wales decided to test a simpler, smaller approach - accessible, cheap, and not prone to whims of weather.

To find out whether the benefits of nature could be captured on a small scale, Dr Phelps and colleagues prepared a feasibility study of a simple ecotherapy-based intervention in women affected by [breast cancer](#).

Seven women from an existing breast cancer support group cultivated and customised their own indoor "garden bowls" for three months. They started with a bowl, compost and three starter plants, which they took home and tended daily. The women reported on their feelings and findings in diary entries, collected within the research paper.

"I think it doesn't matter whether you've just been diagnosed or whether it's been ten years down the road - it could be beneficial," one of the patients explained when reflecting on her bowl. "The garden bowl could help you deal with whatever you have left behind."

The women felt that the process of tending the bowl and reflecting upon it led to feelings of positivity, control and meaning.

"The take-home message is that psychosocial interventions do not have to be complex, labour-intensive to deliver, or costly," says Dr Phelps.

While it's a simple study on a small group, the paper suggests that even

small interventions can have big impact.

"The concept was inspired through a unique meeting of minds between myself, a registered health psychologist familiar with the world of randomised trials and psychological interventions, and co-researcher Carol Hughes, a qualified counsellor and Gestalt therapist who believes that engagement with the natural world can have a powerful healing and therapeutic effect amongst individuals experiencing distress," explains Dr Phelps. "It was two different but complementary disciplines coming together to create a really unique project!"

What's next for the multidisciplinary research team?

"We are also considering whether such benefits can potentially be achieved through "virtual" green activities," says Dr Phelps.

"We're exploring whether there is something unique about the living, breathing nature of real green activities that cannot be captured through virtual reality worlds."

And it's another nature-based benefit that could be harvested - rain or shine.

More information: Ceri Phelps et al. Sowing the seeds or failing to blossom? A feasibility study of a simple ecotherapy-based intervention in women affected by breast cancer, *ecancermedicalscience* (2015). [DOI: 10.3332/ecancer.2015.602](https://doi.org/10.3332/ecancer.2015.602)

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