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Mad about gardens

By [ANDREW TAN](#) - 22 July 2006
[Straits Times](#)

IF ALL the stress at the office is driving you crazy, you should take up gardening, says leading European garden designer Nico Wissing. He should know what he is talking about, having made a name for himself in the field of therapeutic gardens, in particular, one for dementia patients.

The latter, constructed in 2002, proved so popular with patients that the institution invited him back to design additional and bigger ones for the rest of the place.

The 45-year-old Dutchman was in town last week for meetings with the National Parks Board (NParks). He is one of more than 20 big-name garden designers from around the world who will be taking part in the inaugural Singapore Garden Festival to be held in December.

"Towns and buildings deserve far more green than many of them receive at present," he says. "Green has been proven to reduce stress." His therapeutic gardens - especially for those suffering from senile dementia - go a step further.

They seek to alleviate the patients' feeling of loss or helplessness when the memory fails or proves defective.

To do this, such gardens are planted with flowers and vegetables that would have been common in the days of the patients' youth. These trigger recognition and memories of happier times when they were in their prime.

Similarly, the gardens are furnished with craft items and tools from earlier days to aid memory recall. The gardens are also designed to activate the senses: colourful flowers catch the eye and create a sense of cheer, scented ones perfume the air, while those with interesting textures encourage touch. The sense of sound is enhanced by plants that rustle in the wind - such as bamboos - and running water where possible.

Naturally, such gardens are designed with wheelchair access in mind, as well as to be seen from the rooms of the nursing home for those unable to go out. The therapeutic benefits of green, Wissing says, affect society on a larger scale, too.

In his book *Wissing Tuinen, Outlook* (2005), he says that research in the Netherlands over a 15-year period has found that: Patients with a view of greenery from their hospital beds stay an average of 7.96 days while those without a green view stay an average of 8.7 days; Children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) perform better if in regular contact with nature; and Students with a view of greenery achieve better scores in terms of concentration.

He adds: "Studies have shown that trees planted alongside motorways reduce the effects of the emission of harmful gases by between 20 and 30 per cent. More green in residential areas not only means an improvement in air quality, but also in noise pollution."

He also reports that in the Netherlands, studies have found that houses in a green environment fetch 30 per cent more than equivalent ones in non-green locales.

And even municipal authorities have discovered that if you create a park in, say, a vacant lot, it has the effect of lowering crime and vandalism because it tends to attract children and families instead of tramps, thugs and troublemakers.

In short, having more greenery is so beneficial to your health, your neighbourhood's health and even the health of the economy, you'd be mad to ignore it.

How has greenery helped you alleviate stress? E-mail your views and pictures to a1admin@sph.com.sg



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