



Therapeutic gardening is not a new concept, but it is becoming more widely accepted, and there is a new understanding that where you garden can be as important as what you do there.

Creating a Sanctuary Garden

Sanctuary garden, retreat, soul garden, refuge: whatever you choose to call them, these private areas provide a chance to meditate, relax, and decompress, away from the sights and sounds of the everyday world.

Not only are they becoming more popular; some today would even call them necessary.

Human beings have traditionally maintained a close relationship with the soil. The creation myths of most societies and religions encompass a belief that humankind came originally from the earth.

According to the ancient Greeks, Prometheus shaped man from mud. In Hebrew, "Adam" means "born of the earth." Many native Americans portrayed man as coming from deep inside Mother Earth.

Gardening, whether for physical or spiritual sustenance, is a pastime as old as history itself. Many religious traditions used a garden setting to represent both the beginning and end of life.

According to Chuck and Barbara Crandall, authors of *Creating Privacy in the Garden*, "Our passion for private garden retreats is as old as civilization itself, stretching back across the millennia to the earliest vestiges of Pharaonic Egypt."

Depending on your source, the English word "paradise" comes from the Persian word for "beautiful fenced-in garden" or from the Greek word *paradeisos*, meaning "enclosed park."

Murals from ancient Egypt depict walled gardens, and medieval religious groups are known to have grown their food

behind walls to isolate the monks from the distractions of the outside world.

With the rise of cities, even in ancient times, this closeness to the soil began to fade.

In modern days, rather than seeing ourselves as “stewards” or caretakers of the earth, nature became something which needed to be controlled and managed to our own advantage, and we were more likely to view it from a distance, both physically and mentally.

Today, the pendulum is gradually swinging back. The intensity of modern life and the pace of technology, particularly in America, is forcing us to re-evaluate our lives.

As Donald Norfolk writes in *The Soul Garden*, “People need gardens today more than ever before. In an increasingly frenetic age they offer a vital source of comfort and an opportunity for mental, physical, and spiritual renewal.”

He goes on to say, “As a race we have inhabited planet earth for at least two million years. For 99 percent of this time we led a nomadic existence. It is only in the last ten thousand years that we have mastered the art of farming and learned to live in towns. This is a mere blink in the annals of recorded time. Deep down we still feel displaced, and yearn to regain contact with our pastoral roots.”

Not only are we displaced, but so is wildlife, and wildlife doesn't have the same resources that we do to help them adapt. Food is rarely limited or even seasonal for us, since we can buy products from around the world in our local supermarket.

Drinking water is so plentiful that it comes in flavors! If we

Some gardeners seem unable to fully enjoy their gardens, so caught up are they in the latest skirmish with mildew or beetle...

My philosophy is: Forget winning, cultivate delight.

*– Diane Ackerman
Cultivating Delight*

have less open space for shelter or raising a family, we build taller buildings. For all our needs, we have options not available to other species.



To re-establish true harmony with the earth, a sanctuary garden should also be a welcoming place for wildlife. Sometimes this calls for a bit of compromise, but the trade-offs are worth it. By not using any herbicides or pesticides, you agree to accept a few munched leaves in exchange for butterflies and other beneficial insects.

When you choose native plants over alien species, you agree to surround yourself with a different, although equally beautiful, palette of texture and color in exchange for birds which eat the seeds and berries. **The true beauty of working with**



nature, instead of trying to control it, is that there are no losers.

There can be no specific directions on how to build a sanctuary garden, because the design, and even the process of creation, will be different for every gardener, as well as for every site.

Thus, every sanctuary garden is unique, although it will generally incorporate certain basic elements. It will naturally be suited to the space available, but it should also be very personal, reflecting individual preferences and needs.

Creating Your Sanctuary

Deciding where to locate your sanctuary is the first step in creating your garden.

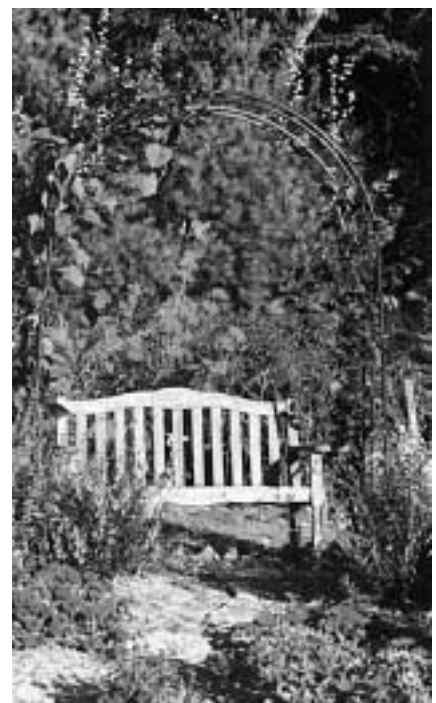
It need not be large, but the area should lend itself to being somewhat confined, whether visually or physically.

Sometimes a narrow side yard can be developed into a retreat.

Some people choose to build walls or fences within a larger area, and these can both create privacy and provide support to taller plants or climbing vines. If structures are made of materials like stone or wood, they will fit the natural feel of the garden.

Other gardeners prefer to use plants, such as hedgerows or evergreens, to create the borders of their sanctuary and form a backdrop to shorter elements. Whatever you choose, the result should give you a feeling of safety and separation from outside pressures.

You might also be creating this garden with other inspirations in mind. If you need more lightness and humor in your life, add touches of whimsy



such as brightly-colored chairs or silly sculptures hidden among the leaves. To honor the memory of a loved one, plant their favorite flowers, or a special tree.

Think about any others who will be using the retreat. Those who are visually impaired will appreciate a concentration of scented plants. If someone uses a wheelchair, make the path smooth and easy to navigate, and consider using raised planting beds.

Many designers of garden retreats firmly believe that your sanctuary should have a distinct entryway. If you always stop to pause at this same spot, picturing yourself leaving your stress outside as you go through, the ritual will become automatic and a sense of peace will begin to heal your spirit as soon as you step into the garden itself.



Once inside, there should be a path to lead you to a bench or other comfortable seat where you can relax and gradually merge with your surroundings.

Your sense of taste can be satisfied with edible berries and herbs. Nothing is sweeter than just-picked fruit warmed by the sun.

Herbs can also entice your sense of smell as you brush against them. Footsteps release the fragrance of creeping thyme planted along garden pathways.

Every gardener knows the pleasure of smelling damp earth, especially after a spring rainfall. All of your senses, stimulated and working together, will help you to become aware of the many facets of your sanctuary garden, and make you feel a part of the nature surrounding you.

Water is Critical

While the various elements of your retreat will depend on your preferences and the space that you have available, you should definitely include at least one water feature. This might be a bird bath, a small fountain, or just a shallow bowl of water near a bench which reflects the clouds and colors of light.

Moving water is especially effective. It is important for wildlife, and adds a comforting sound to the garden.



There are manufactured units which produce ponds and fountains of any size, or you can create your own with just a plastic liner or a combination of containers and a recirculating pump.

Even a bucket with a small hole in the bottom, dripping into a saucer below, will attract wildlife and bring the music of water to your retreat.

If your space is large enough, consider scattering water elements throughout the garden. All creatures need available water throughout the year, and the more varied the



"The more time we spend in natural surroundings, the more we acquire the attributes of nature. Our lives take on the qualities of our environment, becoming more ordered, stable, and harmonious."

*– Donald Norfolk
The Soul Garden*

presentation, the more diverse will be the wildlife that you attract.

Select Native Plants

Plants will probably make up the largest part of your garden. Whenever possible, choose native plants when making your selections.

The native species will attract the most wildlife, and will require the least care, because they are genetically adapted to live in your environment.



By choosing native plants, you'll also be helping to restore an ecological balance which is threatened by development and alien species.

Wildlife depends on native plants for food and cover, and may not be able to adapt to non-native substitutes.

Mitchell also points out that "If every homeowner in the country gave only 1/10 of an acre to a meadow, bog, marsh, prairie, field, or woodland, the net gain would be an astonishing 3.8 million acres of sanctuary."

Each sanctuary garden that we create is an opportunity to increase habitat for native plants and animals, and they in turn will enhance our experience of the garden.

When choosing plants, mimic nature by selecting a variety of species, sizes, and types. Your choices can enhance the garden, at the same time that they encourage wildlife to visit.

"Water is a key to sanctuary. Its sacred influence over human history is unmatched among all other natural forces..."

Lose this vital force, and Earth becomes just another barren rock circling the sun."

*– Christopher and Tricia McDowell
The Sanctuary Garden*



"Plants are part of the food chain for the insects and animals that live in our gardens...In deliberately providing sanctuary for the creatures around us, we must also provide the plants that wildlife know."

*– Sherry Mitchell
Creating Sanctuary*



Time in the garden – experiencing the moment, the pause between the breath; fully being in the moment; letting go of fear, stress, and any feeling of incompleteness – links us with eternity.

We can then appreciate and celebrate all that we have by being truly present.

*– Elizabeth Murray
Cultivating Sacred Space*

Evergreens provide visual winter interest and cover for wildlife, while deciduous species bring color to the garden in autumn and movement as the leaves fall, leaving bare branches as living sculptures.

Seedheads left in place after flowers bloom will artfully catch the snow while offering natural birdseed. Vines can provide both cover and food, and their twisting stems add sculptural details to a wall or arbor.

Build a Plant Community

Your goal should be layers of plant material, rising up from perennials and grasses, into shrubs and small trees, and finally to taller trees.

You are striving to create a plant *community*, not a series of specimen plants.

Although economics may require that you buy some plants when they're relatively small, keep their mature height in mind when placing them in the garden.

Don't neglect to plant larger species, even if it will be many years before they mature. They will be your legacy to future generations.

With all of this concentration on designing and maintaining a sanctuary, it is important not to lose sight of your main objective: to lessen stress.



If you enter your garden retreat thinking only of the work that needs to be done, then you will have lost track of the main reason for creating it.

While the garden work itself – the digging and weeding and watering – can be part of the relaxation process, there also needs to be time for idleness.

This is frequently a hard concept for gardeners to embrace, and it is one of the main reasons that you should include a bench or other

comfortable seat, situated so that you can easily view a focal point.

Particularly in our western culture, we equate work with profit and even with morality. In a sanctuary garden, if you constantly feel that you must be working, you've simply brought the pressures of the outside world in with you, and you will be unable to lose yourself in those sights and sounds of nature that you've incorporated into your refuge.

Let Your Senses Absorb Nature

We humans have altered our normal cycles with electricity that lets us work in the dark, caffeine which wakes us up when our bodies crave sleep, and a tendency to even work hard at planning and "enjoying" our vacation time.

Our time in the garden should have periods when we lose ourselves in the tasks of weeding and watering, but even more important are those periods when we sit quietly and let all of our senses absorb the nature surrounding us.

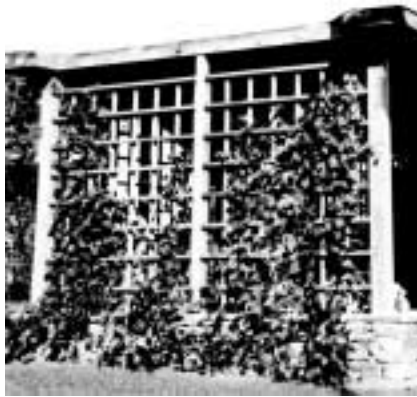
A sanctuary garden can help us return to the normal patterns of nature.

Frequently it's people who already have a yard who start envisioning a sanctuary garden, but those with less space – for instance, apartment or condo dwellers – are often the ones

with the greatest need for a quiet retreat.

If your space is limited, you can still create a sanctuary on a smaller scale. Lattice panels or bamboo blinds form walls on a deck or patio, a small tabletop fountain provides water, and gentle wind chimes mask surrounding sounds.

Buy plants that provide diversity: variegated leaves,



spiky foliage, different heights, lots of color. Flowers will attract butterflies and hummingbirds, and large pots can hold miniature trees or shrubs which bear fruit for birds.

If you add a bird-house appropriate for local species, you might have the thrill of watching new life born into your sanctuary.

While a smaller-scale garden might not have room for a walking path, you can arrange your chair and plantings



so that your eyes travel along curved lines, stopping at small sculptures or other focal points, delighting in the variety of colors, shapes, and textures.

Be sure to include some herbs or other scented plants, perhaps just beside the door where you will brush against them, creating an entrance distinguished by scent instead of a gate.

You might be able to add a small arching arbor, with pots

at each side to hold vines which will cover the structure, adding interest and shade.

Candles and Lights

In the evening, if you don't have a view of the night sky, candles or small strings of lights can add a comforting glow. **The size of a sanctuary garden is less important than the attitude that you bring to it, and your willingness to let nature work its magic on you.**





The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature, and God...

As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.

– Anne Frank

It is natural at this time to be focused on the horrendous events of September 11, 2001, but a wider perspective acknowledges that countless tragedies, both larger and smaller, have occurred throughout human history.

In response, people everywhere, in every generation, have looked for solace in natural surroundings, particularly in gardens.

The cycles of nature we see there remind us that life itself will continue, regardless of what we may have lost in the past, or what faces us in the future.

As you create and enjoy your own retreat, may you find healing and comfort and a deep acceptance of your own connection to the world of nature.



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