

Book review

'Digging for Victory': Horticultural Therapy with Veterans for Post-Traumatic Growth

By Joanna Wise
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I will not cease from mental fight
(William Blake).

Joanna Wise came from a research background, in psychology and psychotherapy at Guy's Hospital, London. Her next step was to become a successful Garden Designer; later qualifying as a Horticulture Therapist. She worked with Gardening Leave, the charity for Veterans. This is her main experience of those with PTSD. She introduces horticultural therapy for veterans as a culturally acceptable, cost-effective, and evidence-based treatment. There is a cultural divide between those who have had military experience and those who have not, which is a good reason why this book is needed.

The author uses the all-inclusive definition of a "Veteran", as someone who has served in the armed forces for at least a day. It is estimated that in the UK there are one million Veterans who suffer from mental disorders or substance misuse, including 20,000 with PTSD. It would be exaggerating to describe this book as a *Bible* on horticultural therapy (HT) for veterans, but "new testament" would be about right. Here are some of the chapters: The Psychological Side of the Veteran's Journey; How HT meets Veterans' needs; Structuring the HT programme; Staff, Support, Supervision and Training; Setting Goals and Defining Outcomes; and the Horticulture Programme. The latter section is of particular interest to me, having worked as a horticulture trainer.

How does a horticulture programme work for those with mental health needs? Quoting Wilma Landgraf, a Senior Horticultural Therapist, "Maybe, paradoxically, it is the very fact that there are no hidden tasks, no hidden questions, no 'traps', for veterans, who very often find it difficult to trust, either humans in general or civilians in particular". This makes a lot of sense for me. The effects are on the mind and the body; and there are also social benefits.

The chapter on the horticulture programme is the most extensive. There is a full month-by-month year plan for horticulture and related activities (20 pages), including seasonal events which can be a stimulus for certain activities, e.g. Burns Night and the RSPB Big Bird Watch. It is suggested that for suitable tasks, each person is given a laminated printout to begin with, with instructions. The author also considers it important that staff (and presumably volunteers) follow the same methods. This is a good principle, but the main problem might be – whose methods are adopted?

There is also a valuable appendix on resources; sections include: Information and Research on Veterans with "Invisible Injuries"; Specialist HT projects for Veterans in the UK (unfortunately one has closed, Gardening Leave), Sustainability and the Horticulture Programme. The only disappointment was that the section headed Safe Practice, did not refer to any resources. Another minor shortcoming of the book is that in a couple of figures, the print is too small to read. None of this detracts from my impression that it presents a full exploration of the subject, backed up by the author's understanding of Veterans' psychology and horticultural expertise.

A footnote about research appears in the appendix, written by Joe Sempik, of the University of Nottingham. "[...] to present the case for green care in the

future, researchers need to raise awareness of the value of qualitative methods by presenting new and interesting findings using some of the newer methods and approaches in this field [...] Such research findings and the power of the methods need to be widely disseminated. What will make the difference in the long term will

not be one definitive RCT but the steady flow of high quality research findings using a wide range of methods”.

Julian Ashton

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