

Flower power: gardening as therapy in Poland

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An elderly woman leans over to smell a lush flowerbed of lavender in sprawling gardens surrounding an imposing early 20th-century palace in a pastoral corner of eastern Poland.

Slowly a smile lights up her face, erasing her previous stony expression—she suffers from paranoid schizophrenia which often renders her emotionless.

The sudden burst of happiness is one of the benefits of horticultural, or garden [therapy](#), as it is better known.

She is among 59 female patients at this state-run, [mental health care home](#) in the village of Ruskie Piaski who are undergoing the springtime treatment, introduced here in 2014.

"Gardens provide an environment that stimulates many senses; the patient can smell the scents of flowers and plants, touch them, and even get pricked by thorns," says biological scientist Bozena Szewczyk-Taranek, who has created a horticultural therapy training course at the Agricultural University of Krakow, due to start in September.

"It also facilitates physical exercise, for example for patients who have problems with balance, they can hop from one stone to another.

"But when we have intellectually-impaired patients, we must make sure there are no toxic plants in the gardens like yews, hydrangeas or lily of

the valley," she told AFP in an interview.

Walking on pebbles

The positive influence of a garden on the ill is thought to have already been known in Ancient Egypt, but modern therapy dates back to the 19th century and was used to help soldiers wounded in World War I.

While horticultural therapy does not cure mental illness, it can stimulate patients both intellectually and socially, boosting their self-confidence and sense of well-being, experts say.

Even just getting them out of their rooms into the fresh air can help by improving their physical condition.

Alina Anasiewicz, the director of the Ruskie Piaski care home which is one of the leading centres in Poland for garden therapy, says she came across it on a 2013 study trip to Switzerland.

"We brought home quite a few of the methods we learnt from the Swiss," she told AFP.

She points proudly to a fountain, where, on hot days, patients can touch the flowing water and wade into a small pool with pebbles lining the bottom that tickle their feet.

'Changing mentality'

To reach the fountain, patients must walk barefoot along a "sensory path", of gravel, sand and wooden logs, allowing the varied textures to stimulate their senses.

On the other side of the palace, three patients are working hard, digging a vegetable garden. Anasiewicz says that later they will also make preserves from the vegetables and berries they grow and harvest.

She says that, while the progress made by patients undergoing garden therapy is obvious to her, some of the staff who had been working at the centre for years needed convincing about this novel approach to mental health.

"It's sometimes easier to do all the hands-on renovation work for the gardens than to change the mentality of our staff," Anasiewicz told AFP.

Closing the gap

In 2013, Switzerland handed her a cheque for 1.4 million zloty (330,000 euros, \$370,000) to create the therapeutic park, with flower and vegetable gardens as well as an orchard, at the care home.

The sum covered 85 percent of the project, with local authorities chipping in the rest.

While it is not a member of the European Union, Switzerland set up a financing programme a decade ago to help reduce disparities between wealthier old EU members and poorer new ones, such as Poland.

It spent a total of 1.3 billion Swiss francs (1.2 billion euros, \$1.4 billion), of which Poland received almost half a billion.

The funds were spent on 58 projects across Poland, many focused on health, including the removal of asbestos from the roofs of houses—131,000 tons in all—and installing hectares of solar panels.

'Miss the garden'

Patients at the Ruskie Piaski care home can stay as long as their condition requires medical supervision and are able to leave for family visits or have visitors, but their daily garden therapy can depend on the weather.

Staff say that when the weather is bad or in winter, patients are more depressed. One went on a visit to see her family, but asked to return earlier than planned.

She'd said simply, "I miss the garden", they explained.

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