

# a Children's Garden for Health and Healing

An Oregon garden celebrates 20 years of bringing the therapeutic power of nature to pediatric patients, their families, and hospital staff at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center. BY VIVEKA NEVELN



Left and above: A children's garden tucked into a courtyard at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center provides young visitors with an outdoor space to learn, play, and heal.

IN 1997, a children's garden at the Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, opened to patients, visitors, and hospital staff. It was one of Legacy's first therapeutic gardens, and among the earliest garden of its kind in the United States, and even the world. Today, it is an integral part of Legacy's Therapeutic Gardens Program, which comprises 12 gardens around eight medical center campuses in the Pacific Northwest.

Each one of Legacy's gardens is "intended to offer therapeutic benefit to all," explains Teresia Hazen, coordinator of the Legacy Therapeutic Gardens Program. This includes patients of varying ages and degrees of ability, their visitors, medical personnel, and the general public.

## MULTI-FACETED DESIGN

To ensure that the children's garden could appropriately serve pediatric patients in

addition to everyone else, Legacy took a team approach to its planning and design. Clinicians and other hospital staff, current and former patients, horticultural therapy volunteers, and school teachers were all involved. They worked with landscape architects to identify features to include or modify for the purposes of offering children opportunities for rehabilitation, education, play, and restoration. "This collaboration and cooperative work is es-



Left: Splashes of color from containers in vibrant hues, a section of path painted like a yellow brick road, and a pair of mosaic-shelled turtles near the orange pavilion complement the profusion of plants in the children's garden. Above: A collection of birdhouses made from recycled material adds an element of whimsy.

sential to develop gardens that serve special needs populations," says Hazen, "as well as promote wellbeing for everyone."

The design also incorporated characteristics identified by the American Horticultural Therapy Association as fundamental to therapeutic gardens (see box on page 38 for more about these guidelines). The resulting 9,000-square-foot children's garden has become a powerful tool for assisting the healing process and coping with stressful medical situations. Accessible around the clock, it provides a safe place for independent exploration and for families to interact

in a more relaxed setting than a hospital room. It supports a variety of therapeutic activities, from cognitive exercises to helping patients regain motor skills. It also offers a pleasant respite from the more sterile hospital environment for doctors, nurses, and other staff, who often take breaks in the garden. Through all four seasons, this outdoor haven seamlessly meets these diverse needs by leveraging nature's positive effects upon human health.

## A GARDEN FOR ALL

From inside the medical center, three doors

provide access to the garden tucked into a courtyard. These entrances lead to a circuitous pathway that allows visitors to navigate the garden in their own way. A sign encourages walking laps around the path for exercise and relaxation, noting that 16 laps equals one mile. Wide and level enough to accommodate comfortable wheelchair and stroller access, the path runs past several raised beds and containers that bring colorful plants within easier reach.

Encouraging people to interact with nature through touch and their other senses is an important element of this garden, so the plant palette is carefully selected with this in mind. Signage points out particular plants visitors can touch or smell or sometimes even taste. Scheduled activities such as a monthly "nature station" engage youngsters in hands-on exploration of the natural world. A fountain sculpture of children appearing to play with an old-fashioned pump irresistibly draws kids of all ages to the splashing water, and a small lawn in the middle of the garden is a favorite spot for rolling and lolling in the soft grass.

Several whimsical touches, such as a rabbit-shaped topiary poised in mid-hop and a collection of jaunty birdhouses, also contribute to the playful atmosphere. One section of the path features a yellow brick design and a smiling tin woodsman sculpture nearby. Next to a large orange-and-blue pavilion, two turtle sculptures invite kids to clamber over their mosaic shells.

While the garden does impart a sense of fun, "it does not try to be a playground to entertain children. Rather, it's a place



While visitors may partake in self-guided exploration anytime, regularly scheduled programs like this nature station help to engage children and families in hands-on experiences in the garden.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THERAPEUTIC GARDENS

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) has defined a set of characteristics that therapeutic gardens should possess. The children's garden at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center used these principles to guide its planning and design process, and the completed garden even earned a design award from the AHTA in 2000. But because these characteristics help to further inclusion and equity, "they should be addressed in all gardens for children," says Teresia Hazen, coordinator of Legacy's Therapeutic Garden Program. "We need to design for the widest range of users, including their families," she adds. Here are the characteristics and the ways that Legacy's children's garden interprets them.

### 1. Scheduled and programmed activities.

Events that encourage people to experience the garden include monthly "nature stations" for children and their families, rehabilitation therapy sessions that meet patient goals in the garden, and even botanical- and wildlife-themed art exhibits in the bordering hallways that complement the views into the garden.

### 2. Features modified to improve accessibility.

Wide, smooth walking surfaces with gentle inclines can be used for rehabilitation therapies. Raised beds accommodate wheelchair users and those unable to bend to the ground. Seating walls and plenty of other places to sit support patients with decreased balance and endurance.

**3. A profusion of plants and people/plant interactions.** Simple patterns of paths allow patients and visitors unhindered access to the lush botanical collection. Plants and other



A shady seating wall beside a garden bed provides a comfortable spot for Teresia Hazen, who coordinates the Legacy Therapeutic Gardens Program, to converse with a visitor in the children's garden.

features are selected to provide sensory stimulation in all four seasons. Signage, plant placement, and regularly scheduled activities encourage visitors to interact with and learn from the garden.

### 4. Benign and supportive conditions.

The space is designed as a safe, secure, and comfortable setting for patients and visitors. Sheltered nooks offer some privacy, while more central areas accommodate social interaction. The pavilion and numerous trees provide shade. Pesticide use is avoided.

### 5. Universal design.

Features and programming accommodate the widest possible range of needs, from ambulatory children and their families to wheelchair-bound patients of all ages.

**6. Recognizable placemaking.** A simple, unified, and easily comprehended setting allows patients and other visitors to focus on plant-related restoration of body and mind. —V.N.

that they can feel at home in," says Brian Bainson, a landscape architect with Portland-based design firm Quatrefoil that has worked on the garden.


That homey, welcoming feeling also comes across through the benches and other seating options around the garden. Those unable to explore quite so actively may choose to rest in a chair under the pavilion. And those wishing to simply decompress for a few moments may sit in a quiet nook off the main pathway. In 2014, a terrace garden overlooking the children's garden was added, providing even more access to the lush scenery. The views can be enjoyed from the inside, too, thanks to corridors filled with large windows that surround the courtyard. And "patients do request a room with a garden view," says Hazen.

## BETTER HEALTH THROUGH GARDENS

In the 20 years since the children's garden at Legacy Emanuel opened, awareness of nature's beneficial impact on human health has grown exponentially. Reams of research confirm that interacting with the natural world is good for us in myriad ways. In tandem with this, the relatively young field of horticultural therapy has also become more widely recognized for its contributions to health and wellbeing.

Perhaps because of all these developments, "the movement for therapeutic gardens seems to have reached a tipping point," says Hazen. Many health care facilities now have such gardens on their campuses, including green spaces specifically for children. And because of Legacy's longtime success in serving a diverse hospital population, Hazen says, "we receive

regular calls for consultation from across the country." Receiving well-deserved recognition for the garden's therapeutic efficacy is no doubt gratifying, but far more significant is the appreciation from the people who directly benefit.

"One physician told me that while he is at work, he goes out of his way to walk through the garden as often as possible," says Bainson. "It is one of the things that keeps him going even on tough days. I think that says a lot about why this garden and others like it are so important." Hazen agrees, noting that "something magical happens when people spend time in well-designed therapeutic gardens." 

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