

What is SWOP?

The Sheltered Work Opportunities Project is a registered charity, based in Bournemouth, serving the communities of East Dorset and West Hampshire. It was set up to address the great need for meaningful occupation, in a supportive and pressure-free environment, for adults with severe and enduring mental illness. SWOP aims to use the therapeutic nature of horticulture to restore mental well-being.

The Trustees of the charity, who meet quarterly, come from a variety of backgrounds including business, horticulture, accounting, healthcare and disability rights advice. Both SWOP projects elect their own Management Committee, which then meets regularly to discuss any important matters and sort out problems. The majority of the committee members are nursery volunteers.

Why is SWOP needed?

Research shows that, in any one year, at least 25% of the population will experience a mental health problem. Many people with mental illness want and need to fill their time usefully and productively, but are unable to cope with the stresses and pressures of open employment. Sheltered work in a realistic but pressure-free environment is a useful way to promote recovery by boosting self-esteem and confidence, providing companionship and mutual support, and helping to dispel boredom and loneliness and restore dignity.

Cherry Tree Nursery

SWOP's first project, Cherry Tree Nursery, is now a successful commercial plant nursery sited on land belonging to Bournemouth Borough Council. It has grown from 4 volunteers on 2 acres in 1990, to over 160 volunteers on 4.5 acres today. The nursery produces over 90,000 finished plants, 100,000 liners, 125,000 cuttings and 1,000 specimen-sized plants annually.

The Nursery aims to provide a supportive family atmosphere and to address the individual needs of each volunteer. There is no time limit to anyone's stay, and the nursery offers continuing support to those volunteers who have chosen to move on.

Volunteers work in all aspects of the nursery. This can vary from taking cuttings, laying slabs and digging trenches, to operating the till, issuing invoices, delivering plants and making the tea. Cherry Tree offers a very wide range of support including literacy and numeracy classes, introduction to computers, basic cookery and healthy eating, basic needlework repairs, horticultural training, and a specialist Disability Rights Advice Service. Volunteers are offered a wide range of social activities, talks, outings, films, visits and events which can enable them to become more independent and broaden their outlook. They are encouraged to care for each other and to feel

important, valued, needed, loved and respected, and to learn to laugh again.

Part of SWOP's brief is to reduce stigma and discrimination by promoting public awareness of mental health issues. We have an Information Centre, and talks are given to local groups and organisations, who also visit the nursery. Cherry Tree is regularly featured in the local media, produces newsletters, holds Open Days, and has produced a DVD about the work of the charity, which has a high profile within the field of therapeutic horticulture. The charity has pioneered research into the reduction in admissions to psychiatric hospitals following volunteers attending the nursery, and the consequent benefits to their mental health. Cherry Tree is also involved in research into the horticultural nursery as a restorative environment.

Cherry Tree was awarded *The Queen's Golden Jubilee Award* in 2003 for voluntary service by groups in the community, *The Lilly Reintegration Award Recognising Outstanding Achievement in Mental Health* in 2004, for moving volunteers' lives forward, *The Beacon Prize 2005-6* for our philanthropic achievements and the *Rotary Club Community Service Award 2008*. In 2009, SWOP was chosen as *Charity of the Year* by the Dorset Business Awards. In 2010, Cherry Tree was presented with the *Wessex Charity of the Year Award* at the Guildhall in Winchester .

Due to the high costs of running such a specialist concern, the nursery relies heavily on donations to enable our unique project to continue safely into the future. It is essential, therefore, for us to secure our running costs. While we cover our salaries through plant sales, we depend on our generous friends and supporters for all other funds.

Cherry Tree's current priority is to replace our ancient leaking portacabins with sustainable low energy structures, providing our volunteers with the warm, safe and comfortable buildings they deserve. The first phase was opened by HRH The Princess Royal in March 2012, an event that hugely boosted the self-esteem and morale of our volunteers. Phase 2 was constructed in 2013, and work is now underway on Phase 3 which we hope will be completed by the end of 2014. Our overwhelming priority is to be there for those who need us for as long as they need us. Cherry Tree has become a haven of peace, love, warmth and co-operation, espousing the virtues of working together and of helping and caring for each other.

There can be no doubt of the need for this service, as there is an increasing demand for places at Cherry Tree. SWOP's second project opened in October 2001 at Chestnut Nursery in Poole. It now has over 50 volunteers and specialises in bedding plants and perennials.