

Information leaflet for SWOP

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 rights advice. Each SWOP project elects its 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 experience a mental health problem. Many of these people want and need to fill their time usefully and productively, but feel 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 well over 100 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, horticultural training, a specialist Disability Rights Advice Service, and access to a Community Psychiatric Nurse. Volunteers are offered a wide range of social activities, outings, 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 built a new Information Centre to enable us to do this better 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. SWOP 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. It is now involved with Bournemouth University in research into *'the Horticultural Nursery as a Restorative Environment'*.

SWOP 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, the Dorset Business Awards chose SWOP as Charity of the Year. In 2010, we were presented with the *Wessex Charity of the Year Award* in Winchester at the Guildhall.

Due to the high costs of running such a specialist concern, the nursery will always rely heavily on fund-raising for donations in order to continue our unique and special project. We are currently raising funds to replace our leaking, unrepairable portacabins with sustainable low energy buildings. The first phase of this new building project is now underway.

Chestnut Nursery

Due to the increasing demand for places at Cherry Tree, SWOP's second project opened in October 2001 at Chestnut Nursery in Poole. Chestnut now has 58 volunteers with severe and enduring mental illness. It specialises in bedding plants, as well as growing perennials.