

Outreach at Cherry Tree: Community, Art, Gardening and Environmental Education.

Introduction

A central part of our work at Cherry Tree Nursery has been to create a safe supportive work environment for adults experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems. Within the space of the nursery and through workings with plants, Cherry Tree strives to sustain a restorative environment where volunteers can recover a sense of self-worth, mental well-being, skills and connection with others. However, since its beginnings, the project has recognised that in order to reduce the stigma and discrimination so often attached to mental illness, it is imperative that Cherry Tree works to promote links within the wider community.

Extending our community outreach and its wider importance

This year marked nineteen years since Cherry Tree's inception. While our community outreach efforts continue to aim to promote an understanding of mental illness, we are profoundly aware of the importance of the connection between the environment and people's physical and mental well-being through the work that we do. It is our aim for Cherry Tree to work to inspire the local community about these benefits from contact with nature, growing, producing food locally and sustainability. We hope to achieve this by continuing to work to establish Cherry Tree as a flagship of the principles of sustainability and ecological ideas through our sustainable buildings and renewable energy programme.

We would like to develop and widen the reach of our educational work currently under the theme of 'Caring for People, Caring for Plants'. The nursery already lends itself as a resource for learning in supporting schools in their delivery of the National Curriculum, from science, to PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), citizenship and art, through on-site visits and planting activities. It is our hope to have an environmental education centre adjacent to the nursery and set within the surrounds of the Stour Valley Nature Reserve. This would enable us to work not only with primary schools, but secondary schools, special schools, youth groups and youth support centres for children in care. The centre would take the form of a strawbale roundhouse with an attached community forest garden where vegetables, fruit trees and herbs would be grown. The site would also include a sensory garden to promote interaction and exploration as well as areas for contemplation and reflection. Such spaces are important for all young people and especially those who are experiencing behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

It seems more important than ever to create such spaces for children and young people at a time when they are increasingly experiencing mental health problems themselves or are in contact with adults with mental health problems at home. Figures released by the Centre for Child Mental Health reveal that as instances of anxiety disorders, depression and behavioural and emotional problems increase, a teenager attempts to commit suicide every twenty-two minutes. The incidence of mental health problems is higher for those young people living in poverty and in care. With this, it is our concern that they may be exposed to negative perceptions and beliefs about mental illness which could accentuate feelings of shame and fear and further isolate them.

In response, it is our wish to commission local artists to work alongside young people and the volunteers at Cherry Tree to explore mental health themes (e.g. wellbeing, resilience, inclusion) and the ideas of sustainable art (ecology, social justice, grassroots action) within the community garden. The restorative environment of the roundhouse would also engender opportunities for community events such as storytelling and could also act as a resource centre, for example on plants and gardening, sustainability, mental health and social and therapeutic horticulture. At present, the nursery provides use of its function room and outdoor space for visiting schools and for outside lectures and courses. The roundhouse as an additional venue, would enable us to expand on these for both the local community and the volunteers at Cherry Tree.

As mentioned we see an understanding of mental health and the relationship between the wellbeing of people and the natural environment as foundations for the community outreach programme. As young people are having fewer and fewer opportunities for routine contact with nature, itself thought to contribute to behavioural problems, anxiety, depression and obesity, we are intently aware of the benefits of reconnecting children with their local environment. Cherry Tree's unique location in the nature reserve presents opportunities to raise awareness of and explore local biodiversity and to initiate partnerships with local conservation organisations with the potential for organised talks and day and night time walks.

A site with an environmental education centre, outdoor willow classroom and potting station would enable us to develop an environmental education programme which extends and enriches the curriculum through these outdoor learning experiences. By providing direct and creative experiences of nature and growing, we would hope to enhance children and young people's awareness and understanding and to promote thinking around environmental and societal issues that we are faced with today, as alternative ideas of sustainable futures are explored. The eco-building would itself function to raise awareness of these ideas and would hopefully generate interest in sustainability.

Beyond this, the centre would provide opportunities for young people to learn the value of horticultural skills through first-hand experiences of propagation, planting and harvesting. In particular, we would like to support Special Educational Needs and provide short courses including ASDAN's (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) environmental award. The construction of the strawbale building and the development of a community garden would be created for and with local schools, youth groups and centres and other community groups such as Mind. Further advice would be available to schools to help them in their efforts to transform their grounds into productive green spaces under the national initiatives of Growing Schools and Sustainable Schools. Cherry Tree already supports local schools in their efforts by donating plants and other needed resources and we hope to be able to continue in this way. We envisage many opportunities for wide stretching community partnerships through this and a young person's Saturday gardening group during which, help would be offered to people in the community with their gardens.

We envisage that this project could be incorporated into our 5-year plan for the sustainable buildings programme, to be launched in April 2010.