

Special Purpose Gardens



Special purpose gardens are created by faith communities to provide an outdoor environment that can be used for spiritual, cultural or other specific purposes. Green spaces and gardens are well known for their healing and therapeutic values and can also provide spiritual comfort and connection by using outdoor spaces for faith practices such as prayer and meditation. Gardens are perfect for these types of practices as they offer a quiet, serene space that can be used in three (or even four) seasons! Outdoor spaces can be created intentionally for this type of purpose or a current garden can be retrofit and revitalized. Gardens can also be used to symbolically reflect to the spiritual community and local neighbours the value of beauty, allyship and peace. Consider incorporating these types of outdoor spaces in cemeteries and memorial grounds to offer specific landscaping that provides comfort, calmness and a sense of hope for those visiting.

Smaller special purpose gardens can offer:

- A welcoming and colourful environment at a main entrance
- A place to locate welcoming “open door” signage or symbolic art pieces
- A place for familiar and symbolic plants (such as Bleeding Heart)

Larger special purpose gardens can offer:

- The experience of physically entering into a sacred space, signified with stepping stones and/or path
- The opportunity to retreat into a green space and peaceful scenery away from busy city distractions
- An occasion to benefit from the softer, colourful landscaping with seating areas and green vistas.

Types Of Gardens

Healing/Therapeutic Gardens

Healing gardens offer visitors a place to reconnect and heal whether emotionally or spiritually. These gardens have been installed in health care facilities to help patients heal faster through both being able to see green spaces and from visiting the gardens. Both a view of green landscapes and also immersion in a garden have positive effects for both mental and physical healing. Scientific studies have shown that

immersion in green spaces can have many positive effects including: decreasing stress-levels, boost of positive outlook, lessening of depression and anxiety and increasing generosity. Due to these benefits, healing gardens have much to offer to all communities including faith and spiritual ones.

Therapeutic gardens on the other hand involve the garden visitor in a more active deliberate way, whether it is by engaging the visitor with different senses (sight (colour/texture), smell, touch, etc) or by offering an opportunity to regular visitors to actually participate in the care of the garden. Gardening activities offer even more opportunities to engage the senses, such as the physical touch and scents of the soil, the handling of colourful plants and the watering and nourishment of the garden.

Meditation/Prayer/Quiet Gardens

Meditation, prayer and quiet gardens offer a peaceful space for solitude and reflection. This type of contemplative activity can be heightened by being outside in a garden setting. Being surrounded by the flourishing plants and active wildlife can provide a direct sense of the miracles of creation. For those faith communities that want to offer a prayer/meditation garden, visitors will require a comfortable and sheltered place to sit – such as a bench or a grassy hill overlooking an uplifting vista. These types of gardens need to be buffered from busier areas such as building paths and parking lots or streets. Having a transitional space as visitors move from busier spaces to the solitude of the garden can help visitors mentally unplug. Signs



can also help enrich the users experience with reminders to turn off electronics, to walk slowly and to speak in whispers if necessary. If the garden is for a specific faith community, religious and spiritual symbols and visual reminders provides visitors with familiar clues and a more direct way to connect with their faith. These gardens should provide a place of solace and peace and help uplift and provide a sense of renewal.

Medicine Wheel/Heart Gardens

A medicine wheel garden or other traditional First Nation's plant garden can be designed and installed as a symbol of allyship. It can be as simple as a small sculpture or sign along with the planting of the four traditional medicine wheel plants: Cedar, Tobacco, Sage and Sweetgrass. Or it can be an intricate circle garden that is divided to indicate the four directions and the symbology that each quadrant represents. For many First Nation communities, the circle represents many things including the cosmos, natural cycles of growth, death and rebirth and is woven into many activities such as gatherings and dancing. Ceremonial medicine wheels marked out by stones are used for spiritual purposes such as healing and prayer and visually represent the equality of all things connected in the web of life. The four plants are connected to the four directions: Tobacco to the east, Cedar to the south, Sage for the west and Sweetgrass for the north direction.

Faith communities are encouraged to establish an allyship with their local First Nation's communities by supporting local indigenous programs or through initiatives such as the Kairos Blanket Exercise. Through this new allyship, a faith community can work with a First Nation's community to install a medicine wheel garden or organize a community blessing ceremony when it has been planted by the faith community.

Planting a "Heart Garden" is an activity that was introduced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report. The first Heart Garden for the TRC was planted in Ottawa at Rideau Hall in 2015 with both school children and Residential School survivors planting hearts with messages of reconciliation from across Canada. This art & garden activity can be part of a learning activity for children as they are taught about First Nation, Metis

and Inuit culture and history. The hearts represent the children lost to the residential school system and the act of planting represents the commitment to aiding with reconciliation.

Labyrinth Maze And Garden

A labyrinth maze is a special type of prayer/meditation space. It can be very simple and designed either into a grass path or laid out with paver stones. The labyrinth walk mimics a religious pilgrimage, where one can embark on a journey into the centre of the labyrinth, (which symbolizes the Universe or Creator), rest once they are in the centre and then journey back outwards (back "home") while reflecting on any inspiration or messages received during the walk. It is suggested that the labyrinth walk starts with a question or prayer before one starts the walk and then the path of the labyrinth twists and turns towards the middle, such as many journeys do. The centre of the labyrinth offers mediators a time for reflection and opening to receive any messages or wisdom about the question, prayer or journey so far and then the path back out of the labyrinth provides time to assimilate the messages and full journey experience before returning to 'everyday life' outside the labyrinth. There are both guided labyrinth activities with a trained facilitator or this type of meditation space can be used on one's own. There are many ways to incorporate the labyrinth walk into a congregation's activities.

Starting Your Garden

These gardens will be led by the needs and interests of your faith community. The Outdoor Greening Primer has some great questions to help guide your community towards the most appropriate garden project. It is best to start by identifying the purpose and specific need of your faith community along with the size of the available space. Even a small outdoor green urban space can be a sanctuary and retreat from busy streets and hard concrete.

Identifying needed resources and opportunities is the next step and then there are very practical steps to start a special garden including the calling utility companies to locate any underground utilities before any digging starts. All of these steps are outlined in the Primer. Having a special planting day, where your faith community can enjoy

fellowship and community, along with a celebration once it is complete, helps to elevate the project and truly integrated it into your faith communities purpose and mission.

For these types of special gardens here are some things to consider:

- Green spaces and gardens are naturally very healing. The invitation to be outdoors, to take in with your eyes the energizing green and other vibrant colours, to appreciate repeating patterns and calming textures and to engage all senses, provides many physical, mental and spiritual benefits.
- Gardening itself offers therapeutic benefits also. Involving youth or partnering with organizations that offer council or social services can provide them the opportunity to be out, working with the earth and connecting with others who enjoy being outdoors.
- For gardens that will be designed to offer a quiet place for contemplation and prayer, consider using repetition to instill a sense of calm, whether this is in the re-occurrence of the same plant in various spots or it is in the echoing of the same shape or lines in both hardscaping and softscaping.
- Colours can also be a design consideration that offers comfort, from the calm of a single hue such as yellows and oranges to the serenity of a single white palette. Keep in mind the natural outdoor canvas: the backdrop of green in warmer months and reds and golds warming up the space in autumn.
- A water feature brings in a familiar natural soundscape for visitors and can offer a soothing backdrop of sound. Consider offer seating close to the water feature. This type of feature can also buffer the space from outside noises that might intrude on the serenity of the garden retreat.
- Design the garden to engage all five senses if possible. Along with colour and pattern, consider the angle of light and dappled shade as another texture. Choose soft ground cover

or smooth plants that offer an invitation to touch. Along with water features, consider other soundscapes such as Poplar leaves shaking in the wind or the rustling of grass and don't forget the other two senses by adding comforting and calming scents of evergreens and other favorite flowers and/or the familiar sight (and taste) of edible berries or herbs.

- Smaller enclosed outdoor rooms in a memorial space or burial ground can provide comfort to those visiting. A defined area that offers a quiet and shaded spot can provide shelter and respite from the wider more busy public space.
- Consider the seasons and how plants can offer symbolism with the cycles of nature. Early spring blooms signify renewal and hope, while fruits and nuts demonstrate the abundant harvest and the retreat of both plants and wildlife in winter can remind congregants of the need for rest and simplicity in colder winter months.
- Choose features with intention such as a tall tree that provides an anchor and some overhead shelter to a space. Large rocks provide a variation to a landscape of foliage and also soak up heat on sunny days. Native shrubs provide colour and texture at eye level and also draw in wildlife including local and migrating birds.
- Include spiritual statues and sculptures and significant plants from scriptures that provide touchstones for congregants. Provide places where members of your faith community can sit, pray and meditate. Outdoor spaces offer the added benefit of being soothed by green and comforted by natural cycles, allowing people to relax as they disconnect from the hustle and bustle of their daily life.

Other fact sheets can provide ideas on ground covers, native trees and shrubs, designing a bird-friendly garden that can help with the design of a special purpose garden. The Outdoor Greening Primer provides the basic how-to steps for installing and maintaining a garden.

Links / Further Info:

Quiet Gardens :

www.quietgarden.org

First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada – Honouring Memories, Planting Dreams :
More information on Heart Gardens

www.fncaringsociety.com/honouring-memories-planting-dreams

The Labyrinth Society :

www.labyrinthsociety.org

Veriditas :

More information on Labyrinths

www.veriditas.org

