

Horticultural Education as a Life-Changing Experience®

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Photosynthesis is the link for all life, it is in fact the true meaning of life and much bigger than 42 (Adams, 1979). The simple conversion of the energy of the sun into plant food by green plants is the basis of life, as we understand it.

This understanding is shared by all humanity and has been for all time; every culture is linked to this simply for survival. Every living creature is bound by this special ability of plants. Our cultures all recognise this, remember harvest festivals? All societies hold this knowledge as common and it is a part of each human — it links us all.

The modern lifestyle, with urbanisation, overcrowding, and daily living stress, has meant for many people that these natural links are lost or obliterated. We all know we can unwind and feel better if we walk in a park or find a connection to green plants. Touch horticulture and you instantly connect with this link, to every other life form, and to your true self. Thus discovering a true connectedness or grounding, which engenders self-esteem and positive feelings.

Remember the first cutting you rooted, and how you felt like God? There is incredible personal power in that achievement, and one feels linked to all other growers and the universality of propagation and plant production.

As a student discovers and understands the natural links, they begin to see that they have some knowledge already and they yearn for more. How do you grow cannabis? Can I really produce my own tobacco? Where does sugar come from? Will this acorn really grow into an oak tree? And they look to add information and knowledge. They discover they can and want to learn, and it all keeps on making sense. Also they begin to walk straighter and with confidence.

Linking the training done to issues that appear in the media adds value to the learning offered, and if the students are able to offer extra information to public discussions they will gain respect and encouragement to learn more with each validation.

I had a group of students working on growing eco-sourced plants for a local territorial authority. We collected forest duff and seeds and cutting material from a bush remnant. We talked about provenances, the value and adaptations of plants for local habitats and ecosystems. There was an article on the news about another similar project. The students rushed in next day excited because that was what they were doing, and they had been able to explain it to their families. Each had found a use for their new knowledge.

Television gains great mileage from landscaping makeovers and where it has been possible for students to be involved in these projects they have gained personal standing. They also gain the status of knowing or having met personalities associated with public gardening.

We spent several days working in a garden, which is open for a major garden festival and the students became friendly with the garden owner. After one of our workdays a student commented that the public has to pay to visit the garden but we were there as friends and the owner made us home-cooked morning tea.

We built a food garden and grew heritage potatoes and kumikumi (curcubit), which provided links to the student's food heritage. It has been shown that growing the food we grew up with is an important factor in being sure of just who we are. A study of Italian immigrants into Australia showed that it took three generations of living in the new country before their gardens became indistinguishable from other Australian gardens.

We ran a class looking at native plants as a lesson in plant recognition and learning plant names. We learned the botanical name, the Maori name, and the common name(s). We described each plant. We looked for where it was being used as a landscape plant in our area. Then we researched ways the plant had been used by people, particularly native people. We found uses as diverse as medicinal, antiseptic, using soot for tattooing, cultural uses at births, and other events and spiritual religious uses.

Armed with this new knowledge and keen to discuss it with their family and grandparents/aunties they learned more, but also established a common link with people they had previously had difficulty communicating with.

Students that learn a little and find that their knowledge is of interest to themselves and to others just keep on learning more because of the rewards.

We had a tree of *Prunus campanulata* at our site and it is the first cherry to flower in the area. Knowing the name gave the students recognition as horticulturalists and taught them the value of their special knowledge. Often they would push each other to know and recognise the plants around them. I call this learning by stealth.

Students/people may be drawn into the world of horticulture by some aspect, think of orchid or fuchsia fanciers, school boys who love carnivorous plants or cacti, some who collect bizarre plants or just because plants are beautiful. If we can capture them on their own ground they may be lead willingly to great understandings and skills.

Each of us has, I am sure, experienced the horticultural moment that has taken our breath away. Remember Wordsworth and his daffodils.

"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

I am absolutely sure that Wordsworth felt that moment viscerally, long before his brain could register, explain, or interpret it, and much later he captured it in words for the world to relive and enjoy. Horticulture and nature offer us these moments of divine interpretation, just when we least expect them, in a tiny flower or a giant tree. This is a massive example of horticulture as therapy for humans.

One of my major projects was to build a garden to be a therapeutic environment for people with issues of mental ill health. The project was built by the clients themselves, so they all gained therapy from working with plants and garden design. Many of them learned new skills as they worked on the project, such as design, installing posts, and bricklaying.

The concept of a therapeutic garden is to offer the visitor access to aspects of healing by simply being in the environment. There are four phases of healing as defined by Barnes (1998):

The Journey. The moving to seek change, achieved by choosing to visit the garden to initiate emotional involvement.

Sensory Awakening. When a person becomes stimulated by enchantment or fascination with an external factor. This was facilitated in the garden by offering a mix of familiar and new plants, colour, perfume, views, texture, light, and shade to transfix the individual.

Self Awareness. A person progresses from the experience of self awakening to self awareness, at this time they need a safe haven with space and maybe seating to spend time on self reflection associated with the new experience.

Spiritual Attunement. This is the new state, which may be reached by feeling at one with the world and the new understanding of it, enabling the person to move forward into daily life in a more happy and healthy state.

The garden we built was very user friendly, and it was close to our place of work, but the visitor had to actually take the time to enter the garden. There were no lost corners, all paths came back to the start or there was an option to exit via a closed gate to a much wider public park. We made three garden rooms each with a theme: one was biodiversity, one was edible gardening, and the other was based on the Koro (a native symbol of new life), and each room had seats. The rooms were linked with flowing areas offering bright flowers, bold foliage, and fragrance. At the centre of the site was a planting of native trees, with a set of stepping-stones through it inviting entry. The feeling and power of the garden became apparent on the opening day when it was being blessed by a Kaumatua (Maori leader), as the crowd followed him through the garden slowly they stayed in the garden instead of following the leader.

Horticultural training generally sets out to teach skills and knowledge to students but quite often it can lead to a major life change for the individual.

Life-Changing Experiences Arising from Horticultural Education

- Gain self-esteem
- Gain employment
- Learning to learn/achieve
- Ability to enter further training/education
- Find connections/fellowship with peers and community
- Lifestyle skills
- New health

LITERATURE CITED

- Adams, D.** 1979. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Pan Books, London.
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