



The Alive Activities' guide to designing a dementia-friendly community garden.

Alive Activities is one of the leading practitioners in the UK of meaningful activity for older people and those living with dementia. For over 13 years, we've worked in care homes and in community spaces, providing joyful opportunities for positive engagement, social connection and person-centred support and activity. We are passionate about championing the mental and emotional wellbeing of older people and providing experiences that leave a legacy of happy and connected communities.





Gardening

One of the most powerful ways we have found to work with older people, those with dementia and with our wider community is through gardening and outdoor work. It is clear that connecting with nature and contributing to the world around us can benefit our mental health

For those living with dementia and those who care for them, the acts of gardening and tending to plants can provide an opportunity for connection, act as a reassuring connection to memories and provide tangible and meaningful tasks to focus on. Gardening also provides a rich multi-sensory experience with a range of nourishing stimuli and access to fresh air and exercise.

In 2021 Alive launched a dementia-friendly community allotment which has reached hundreds of individuals, supporting both the person living with dementia and their carer to feel included, accepted and valued. The site is proving to be a hugely valuable community asset and is attended by regular volunteers who support members to get the most from their sessions. In October 2022 this powerful space was featured on the BBC's Gardeners' World.

We have learnt so much from the process and are keen to support initiatives across the country so that more individuals can benefit from accessible outdoor spaces.

Here is a brief guide to curating an accessible, dementia-friendly outdoor space

Before you start - Things to consider

The Site

Consider how people will reach the site

Research public transport routes and consider parking for those who need to use a car. Are there community transport options in your area or local travel schemes?

Connect with local residents

It is important that there is community ownership of the space; talking to locals can give you a great indication of what is wanted and needed locally and to find out about the local community. It is important to understand what is happening nearby. Who is already doing great work in the area? What local groups or individuals might like to get involved? Partnership and collaboration is key to establishing a new community space.

Spend time considering the safety of the site itself

Ensure the site is level with no significant slopes or tricky steps. Assess how the site is accessed, considering if the paths are level and firm and if there are any areas of loose chippings or gravel. Make yourself a risk assessment grid to rate spaces that you are considering, this will enable you to compare and contrast different spaces and their suitability. Think about the security of the site. Is it well-enough lit for the winter months, are there buildings or homes nearby, is there a safe place to wait for transport? Can the site be locked up securely? Also consider whether there is access to toilets and hand-washing facilities on site.





Once you have secured a site.

Community Engagement

Involve local dementia services, arrange site visits (virtual or in person), and ask for their thoughts on how they would like to see the site being used. Consult with potential participants and, if possible, arrange site visits. If a site visit is not possible, take photos or videos on a tablet along to local groups or individuals and ask how they would like to see the site being used.

Engage with local businesses and provide opportunities for local support through team away days or sponsorship. Local businesses can help facilitate the success of the space in lots of ways and can help spread the word about the site.

Engage with volunteering organisations locally. Volunteers are a vital part of running a community outdoor space.

Host open days. Providing casual opportunities for people to drop in and get involved is a great way to gently introduce the space to new people.

Physical Accessibility

Ensure the ground is suitable for wheelchairs, frames and walking sticks. Hoggins or paving work well.

Ensure that paths are wide enough for wheelchairs and that all areas of the space can be reached.

Provide a variety of beds at different heights so everyone can get involved. Raised, U-shaped and ground level beds provide variety for gardeners and increase accessibility. Consider how wheelchair users can approach beds, is there space for legs underneath them?

Ensure there is access to a wheelchair-accessible toilet on site or in very close proximity.

Ensure there is sufficient covered seating for all weathers.



Cognitive Accessibility

Ensure there is sufficient signage to orient visitors around the site.

Provide step-by-step instruction sheets to support activities.

Provide site plans to support arrivals and departures and use of facilities.

Train volunteers to provide a high ratio of social support.

Safety

Use only non-toxic and non-spiky plants.

Install lockable spaces to store tools and any substances that could cause harm.

Cover ponds and water butts.

**“ I love the way there
was so much laughter
and smiles, It’s clearly
a really happy place.**

**Monty Don
BBC Gardeners’ World**





Sensory Considerations

Work with users of the space to co-create accessible planting that stimulates all 5 senses (e.g. a variety of colourful flowers for sight, strong smelling herbs, fruit and vegetables you can eat on site, plants with textured leaves for touch and tall grasses for sound).

Work with the senses in your wider design – consider colour-coded painting, wind chimes, bird feeders and moving water features.

Minimise patches of extreme shade or glare.

Ensure there are quiet spaces for reflection.

Prioritise old-fashioned and classic plants to stimulate memory and conversation.

Document your progress and share it with others

Document the transformation of the space with photo journals, flower pressing and scrapbooks to reflect on your journey.

Share photos and information on social media for others to see.

Share your learning through networks and peer-peer support.





Alive offer bespoke consultation and support for groups setting up and maintaining dementia-friendly community outdoor spaces. To find out more about this service and costs please contact Alive's Community Gardens team on: communitygardening@aliveactivities.org or 07379498764

Find us online: [aliveactivities.org](https://www.aliveactivities.org)

Find us on social media: @ALIVEgardening



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