

Memory Gardens

By Brooke DeNisco

In 1999, the Alzheimer's Association published guidance for creating "memory gardens" as part of its 100 Parks/100 Years celebration and marketing campaign. Portland, Oregon, and Aurora, Illinois, both constructed gardens on public lands using the Alzheimer's Associations guidelines. Another memory garden is currently under construction in Seattle, Washington. Less official dementia-friendly gardens exist at some assisted living and memory care communities, as well as through local park systems.

The Alzheimer's Association hopes that many more cities will look to Aurora and Portland as models and create public gardens devoted especially to people suffering from dementia. The 10,000-square-foot memory garden in Portland is unassuming and quiet, considering it is close to a busy urban street. It is tucked away in a shaded nook next to a baseball field and feels like an oasis. The garden is shielded from the mid-day sun, so it's filled with plants that thrive in low light. There are impatiens and black-eyed Susans, for example. The circular garden path is wide and paved and could be walked in just a minute or two. But benches with vines and arbors invite visitors to sit or have a picnic. There are herbs with fuzzy textures and interesting aromas. For safety, there is a single entrance and exit, which is an iron gate that can be closed while you're in the garden. Tall shrubs partially obscure the metal enclosure, so you don't feel like you're "locked in." The environment is mellow and relaxing for short or longer visits.

Plenty of studies praise the mental health benefits of spending time in nature. A 2015 research project published by Stanford University scientists found that public access to greenspace helps city dwellers de-stress and may even improve their cognitive functioning.

If you have space to create a memory-style garden in your community, consider the following:

- Ensure walkways are smooth, safe, and accessible.
- Use enclosures like fences for safety but obscure them, if possible, with larger shrubs or small trees.
- Make sure there is plenty of shade.
- Use sturdy chairs or other seating so people can sit down and stand up easily and without slipping.
- Plant easy-to-grow, hearty, aromatic herbs such as sage, rosemary, lavender, and mint.
- Consider allowing some flowering weeds that aren't too invasive to grow. They can be very low-maintenance and spark memories.
- Consider using plants that attract butterflies.
- Increase the sensory experience with bird feeders and wind chimes.