

# Engaging ethnic communities with horticultural therapy

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Sustainable development means and needs participation by everyone, ensuring that all members of a community are listened to and have opportunities to make their contribution. Black Environment Network (BEN) is a unique organisation working for full participation by ethnic communities within the built and natural environment. It contributes to sustainable development by enabling a socially excluded group to benefit from the environment as well as to make their contribution to its protection and care.

BEN uses the word 'black' symbolically, recognising that the black communities are the most visible of all ethnic communities. We work with black, white and other ethnic communities. Our work is recognised nationally and internationally as the leader and the pioneer in the field. At the present time BEN has developmental projects in England, Scotland and Wales. We have a network of over 700 organisations across the UK, with members ranging from environmental organisations, government agencies, organisations working in health and social justice, ethnic community groups, schools, academic institutions, researchers to interested individuals. Membership is free to community groups and individuals. A range of services, including networking, are provided to members.

## **Opportunities to engage with ethnic community groups**

Through the work of BEN, many environmental organisations work with ethnic community groups, and many ethnic community groups have their own projects, engaged in a range of activities broadly classed as "environmental", with clear horticultural elements. These include:

- Food and herb growing projects from windowbox and balcony projects to allotments and derelict land
- Community gardens
- Horticultural projects in public parks
- Tree nurseries
- Creating, improving and caring for green spaces
- Wildlife and garden areas of schoolgrounds and community centres
- Planting projects, from flowerbeds to orchards, in the green areas around council estates
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Many members of the ethnic communities are vulnerable, and benefit from the "therapeutic" aspects of these activities. In the main these activities are not perceived as horticultural therapy because:

- The people who run them are not in touch with the concept of horticultural therapy
- The aim of the project is not therapeutic
- The people running the project do not feel that they have proper skills to label what they offer as horticultural therapy although they are aware that aspects of the activities merge into horticultural therapy. Often they feel that they can benefit from knowledge and expertise embodied in horticultural therapy to improve the services or activities which they offer

Benefits for members of ethnic communities include:

- Coming out of isolation
- Befriending
- Gaining social skills through contact with other people
- The widening of horizons through contact with people from the wider world
- Giving structure to the day
- Positive activity for a range of people who are in distress or under stress

There are therefore opportunities for horticultural therapy to make a contribution to the quality of the setting and activities offered to ethnic communities. This can be achieved by:

- Horticultural therapy projects making links with ethnic community projects and sharing their knowledge and expertise, e.g. the potential of particular activities in relation to therapy, the design of areas for planting, the special tools available, the integration of therapeutic processes into activities
- Raising awareness of horticultural therapy among ethnic community groups, using promotional or informational materials including images of members of ethnic groups
- Researching the needs of ethnic community groups with the view to designing and offering training courses targeted at ethnic community groups

Horticultural therapy projects can also reach out to ethnic community projects to offer access by their clients to horticultural therapy. In this context, horticultural projects will need to address whether they have the knowledge, skills, and resources to engage with members of the ethnic communities in a culturally sensitive way. This will need to be considered in different contexts including:

- Building a working relationship with ethnic community groups
- Adapting or developing working processes
- Knowledge of plants/herbs originating from different countries
- Facilities provided, e.g. a room suitable for prayer for some members of the Muslim community who need to pray during the day
- Incorporation of multicultural features or images into the surroundings
- Extra resources needed, e.g. the cost of an interpreter

### **Working with BEN and learning from each other**

There is potential within the BEN Network for the development of engagement by ethnic communities with horticultural therapy. If individual horticultural projects or ethnic community groups are interested, BEN may be able to bring interested parties together and discuss what we can do together. One idea would be to promote networking between ethnic community groups and horticultural projects, enabling them to visit each other and be stimulated to explore ways of working together and fundraise to put activities or projects into place.

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