



access by design

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Inclusive Gardening

By Steven Evanson, RedNewt Limited

Many great and small inventions begin with the words “wouldn’t it be great if...”. So began the TERRAForm wheelchair accessible garden in Nantes, France back in 2000, where there was a local event for contemporary artists in private gardens.



A wheelchair user gardening within arm's reach

The wife of one of the gardeners was a wheelchair user and said that she wanted it to be easier for her to work in her garden. It was difficult to reach and she would get back pain while trying to be involved in her hobby, a hobby that other people find relatively easy. A group of three artists and architects, not gardeners or occupational therapists, took up the challenge to help her and others in the same situation.

They were already very aware of the community spirit that forms around gardens and gardening. They realised the purpose that gardening can give to people who are marginalised in society due to age or physical or mental limitations.

Gardening is an amazingly flexible activity that can transform lives and help everyone regardless of age or ability. Social and therapeutic horticulture uses plants and gardens to improve physical and mental health, and communication and thinking skills.

Gardens are safe and secure places that encourage social mixing, encourage people to make friends and learn practical skills that will help them to feel, and become, more independent.

Gardening improves overall physical health and can strengthen muscles to improve mobility. It provides a sense of purpose and achievement to improve mental health and gives an opportunity to connect with others, reducing feelings of isolation or exclusion.

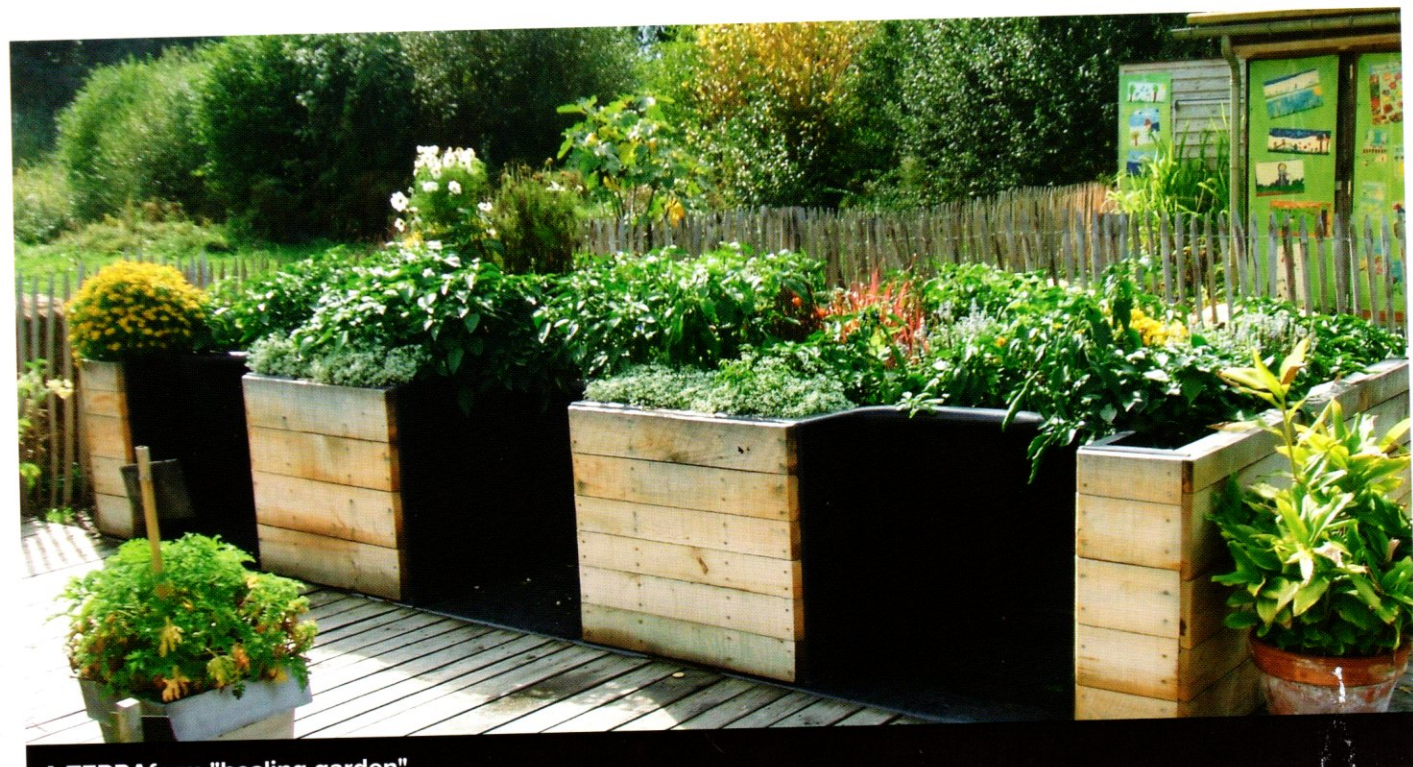
Just being outdoors, and in touch with nature, makes everyone feel better.

Gardening benefits people with many different disabilities, including those recovering from stroke and heart disease, blind and partially sighted people, those in the early stages of dementia and people with physical and learning disabilities.



The food-safe arched pod fits around a wheelchair

Given these clear advantages of gardening for everyone and after much research with potential users, and fighting for funding support and getting knock-backed from their lack of experience in this area, the group, now called La Valise, were finally persuaded by the director of a major institute that it would be selfish not to pursue the project. They designed the arched pod using food-safe recycled



A TERRAform "healing garden"

polyethylene to fit around a wheelchair. The wooden parts are made from European Douglas Fir and are produced by a local sheltered workshop. TERRAforms are shipped to site flat-packed and require only a few minutes to assemble without specialist tools. Units can be singular and free-standing, or linked together.

The company is very happy to supply just the plastic pod to be incorporated into landscape architects' own designs of accessible raised gardens.

There are some troughs-on-legs offered for wheelchair users but they often need to be used by having the wheelchair side-on, which can be uncomfortable and cause muscle strain. TERRAform allows the user to be face on to the work area ensuring that they are comfortable and are not straining. The pod allows for a wheelchair user to get close to the soil and the sizes are such that the whole surface area is within arm's reach.

In troughs the soil fill is necessarily limited and restricts the selection to small plants with shallow root systems. TERRAform is used for all types of flowers and vegetables. It is recommended that the unit is filled first with a layer of branches and packed soil, and then a litter of leaves, fine branches and growing medium. Finally only the top layer needs to be compost.

The system is compatible with organic and ecological farming methods.

Dimensions are Height 80cm, length 150cm, width 120cm. Volume 0.8m³

It is not only wheelchair users who can benefit. People of limited mobility and those who find it easier to sit to garden, can pull a chair in close to the TERRAform to enjoy their hobby without straining.

There are lots of TERRAform "healing gardens" in use now across Europe; in retirement communities, hospitals and community gardens, special schools, agricultural colleges, public parks, care homes and private homes. Many case studies can be seen on the web site at www.terraform.fr.

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TERRAforms are manufactured in Northern France and available in the UK through RedNewt Ltd
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