



BGCI

Plants for the Planet

Caring for your community

A MANUAL FOR BOTANIC GARDENS



APRIL 2015

Case Study

THERAPEUTIC GARDEN, IL GIARDINO SOTTOVICO, NEAR FLORENCE, ITALY

Description: SottoVico BG opened in 2009 after a group decided to convert an illegal waste disposal site into a garden. 'Contact with nature is seen as a way to develop human potential' and the group decided to establish a therapeutic garden. Entrance is free and all areas are accessible to those with physical disabilities. There is a greenhouse with a collection of cacti, a cultural meeting area, a nursery, facilities for workshops, a vegetable garden and the 'walk of the senses'. For three years, in partnership with the local authorities and social services, people with physical and learning disabilities have been involved in running and maintaining the garden. Four people come to tend the garden every week and support its day to day functions such as the work of germinating, collecting plants, cleaning, making labels, etc.

Focus of the activity: The main social issue that the garden aims to address is the social exclusion of people with physical or learning difficulties, and this is accomplished by giving them access to the garden and allowing them to work and mix with new groups of people. Coming to the garden also gives them physical exercise. In turn, the garden staff have developed their skills in working with these audiences. There is no dedicated project associated with this activity, rather it is integral to the ethos of the organisation, part of the way SottoVico BG operates and in line with its main concept, 'to involve children, families, the old and the less able-bodied in both the managing and developing of the place which requires a [wide] range of skills'.

Engagement approach: A crucial force behind the focus of the garden is the vision of its president, whose 30-year-old son has autism and was involved in setting up the garden. During the process his communication skills improved and he became engaged in the tasks he was responsible for. As a consequence, the garden contacted the local authorities and social services and offered to work with people with disabilities. Nowadays, it is the local authorities and the social services that contact the garden and request spaces. Through questioning and working closely with the individuals, activities are matched to their needs, the disabilities specialist uses the *Globalità dei Linguaggi (GdL)* – a non verbal communication method developed by Stefania Guerra Lisi. Staff at the garden, who usually work alone, have learned that the important goal is not to get a lot of work done but to allow people to be involved.

Audience research: There is no formal evaluation conducted, however, there are reports documenting some of this work and its impact which are sent to the social services and to the individuals' families.

Funding: The garden is a non-profit organisation. It doesn't generate any income and its core funding comes from donations from three or four banks, companies and the chamber of commerce. In some cases the families of the disabled participants offer a contribution towards overheads.

Challenges: The garden staff naturally have different attitudes towards their work, in practice some may prioritize the garden's appearance. One member of staff pointed out that for the garden to be therapeutic, it needs to be so for the staff as well. For this reason, when conflict or difference of opinions emerge those concerned are encouraged to bring them to the fore rather than 'sweeping them under the carpet'. The number of people with disabilities involved in running the garden is small because only one member of staff is legally able to supervise these participants, although all the garden staff work with the group in some way.



As well as taking part in running the garden Giardino SottoVico supports people with learning disabilities to take part in creative activities
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