

# My home, my garden story

Exploring how people living with dementia access and use their garden in everyday life

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## Aims of the research

The *My home, my garden story* pilot project aimed to explore the **role of gardens in the everyday lives of people with dementia who are living at home**.

There is **little research on the continued role of gardens in the everyday lives of people with dementia who are living at home**<sup>1</sup>. A better understanding of how, when and why people with dementia living at home use their gardens may help improve support and design for the use gardens in community and care contexts.



## Project team

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## Acknowledgements

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Illustrations were undertaken by artist Lynne Chapman as part of the *My Home, My Garden Story* project: [www.lynnchapman.net](http://www.lynnchapman.net)

All participant names in the report are pseudonyms.

## Research methods

We conducted research with **six households** including people living with dementia and family members during March to July 2020. This included:

- an initial **qualitative interview**, including a **filmed walking interview** around the garden
- participants were then invited to complete a **diary** in the format of their choice, including photo-diaries, written diaries, and filmed diaries
- a **follow up interview** was then conducted to explore the meanings of diaries with participants.

During fieldwork the methods had to be **altered due to the COVID-19** pandemic, so later interviews and garden tours were conducted **remotely using Zoom**. We had planned for artist Lynne Chapman to sketch in people's gardens, however, this had to be adapted to Lynne sketching remotely from films of garden tours.



## Summary of findings: key themes



### Everyday routines

- Garden use is situated within – and shapes – **everyday household routines**. This includes routines of mealtimes, and household chores such as putting the bins out and hanging out the washing.
- **Routines can constrain time spent in the garden** – participants often said they did not have time to spend in the garden, because of other hobbies and activities outside of the home.
- **Mealtimes and coffee/tea time were central to garden routines** – participants would routinely sit on a garden bench or seat with their cup of tea or coffee, or spend mealtimes outside when the weather was good.
- Garden **routines are affected by the weather and seasons**. In their diaries people reported more time outside on warm, sunny days and avoided going outside on wet or cold days, or limited gardening to essential jobs.
- On days when the weather was bad or during the winter having a **view of the garden from indoors** was important – some participants were able to enjoy their garden from their window or conservatory.
- **Looking after pets and wildlife was an important part of daily routines**, for instance, feeding the birds or sitting outside in the sun with pets.

## Example: Judy and Phil's garden routine

Judy (person living with dementia) lives with her husband Phil. The garden is a sociable space where they often sit together for meals or cups of tea, sometimes with their friends and family. However, this activity is weather (and season) dependent:



“Lovely sunny day today so we both sat outside in the back garden listening to the neighbours pottering about in their garden. It got a little windy so we came in about 12.15 to make some lunch.

In the afternoon we sat out in the garden for a cup of tea but again it was a bit too windy so we didn't stay out for long.

EXTRACT FROM PHIL AND JUDY'S DIARY





## Example: Frank enjoying the sensory experience of the garden

One participant Frank (person living with dementia) has never enjoyed doing the gardening – his wife Emma has always been the gardener of the household. But he enjoys sitting outside – particularly with an ice cream! He follows the sun around the garden during the day and sits on different seats to catch the sun at different times. During the walking interview he sat on the bench enjoying the feel of the warm sunshine and the sensory experience of stroking one of their ragdoll cats.

### Sensory experiences of 'being' in the garden

- **Sensory experiences play an important role** in how people living with dementia engage with their gardens – the warmth of the sun, the smell of the flowers, the sound of leaves rustling and birds singing, the vivid colours of plants and flowers.
- Some participants talked about how they had **never enjoyed gardening, but enjoyed 'being' in the garden**. Far from being passive, spending time sitting in the garden involves active engagement with sensory experiences, and **'being in the moment'**.
- 'Being in' the garden also involves **'being with'** – spending time with pets, wildlife, partners, friends and family.
- The **enjoyment of listening to birds** in the garden became even more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one participant said: *'you hear a lot more of the birds now the traffic's a lot quieter.'*



**f** We've got seating for different times of the day. Sometimes you want the blue seat at the end, just right for an early morning cup of coffee, because that's the first place to catch the sun. And in the end of the day the bench here catches the sun, so that's a nice place to sit later in the day.

EMILY, FAMILY CARER



## Identities, memories and biographies

- Spending time in the garden and doing the gardening could be important to the **identities of people living with dementia**. Spending time in the garden involved enacting identities and skills that had been acquired over a lifetime.
- In most households there were divisions where **one person was the main gardener in the household**, and this continued to be part of their identity.
- For participants who had always been the gardener in their household, **continuing to maintain this identity**, and the skills it involves was important. Family carers tried to support the person living with dementia to continue this aspect of their identity.
- Walking around the garden **prompted reflections on past experiences and memories of gardens**. This included memories of spending time with family members in the garden, memories of childhood gardens, and memories of visiting different gardens.



## Example: Sandra, gardening and identity

Sandra (person living with dementia) had always been the main gardener in her household. She and her partner Mike have lived in their home for over 30 years and she had planted most of the plants and trees in the garden. Gardening is still important to her identity, and this identity continues to be enacted in a bodily way – while Sandra was walking around the garden she was continually doing jobs – weeding, dead heading, and tidying up the garden.

During the walking interviews she named different plants, and talked about their properties and histories, and her husband pointed out the step where she used to sit with her son and taught him to read. Sandra said that she loves the birds because her grandad loved birds and kept chickens:

 I love the birds. Because I used to have a grandad that was very good. He used to drive horse and carriages in London. And he was lovely... he kept chickens!

SANDRA, PERSON LIVING WITH DEMENTIA



## Work, leisure and divisions of labour

- For some participants the garden was a **space of leisure** – a place for sitting in the sun, enjoying the garden, drinking tea or coffee.
- The theme of **play** also came up – two couples enjoyed playing table tennis, other participants enjoyed playing with their grandchildren or pets.
- For other participants the garden was a **space of work** – this included domestic labour such as hanging out the washing, and the physical labour of gardening – pruning, digging, raking, watering, planting. Sometimes these activities reflected traditional **gender divisions of labour in households**.



- Activities in the garden could provide a sense of **enjoyment and empowerment** for participants who had experienced a **loss of identities in other areas such as work** (see example).
- Whether the garden was experienced as a space of work or leisure **depended on the weather** – sitting out in the garden was enjoyable when the weather was nice, while during bad weather garden use was limited to essential tasks.
- **Meanings of garden activities were subjective**, and reflected participants' histories and interests – one participant Sandra described raking the garden as 'good fun' while her husband Mike described it as 'hard work'.
- There were sometimes **gender divisions around use of tools** – while in our study women were normally the main gardener in the household, men tended to work with heavy tools. Sandra kept her tools under the sink in the kitchen, while Mike kept them in the garage.

## Example: Justine and Martin, leisure, play and empowerment

Martin is living Dementia and his wife Justine is the main gardener. He has never been interested in gardening, and describes Justine as the 'expert' gardener. Martin describes a loss of his work identity in the context of dementia – he was previously the headmaster of a very successful school, but playing table tennis in the garden gives him a sense of confidence and mastery, as their diary extracts show:



### Friday 24th April

Having completed and cleared our meal we considered a game of table tennis on our front drive. This has become quite a regular activity during these 'lock-down' days and there is absolutely no doubt that I am keen to demonstrate my 'ping-ponging' is, in the not too distant future, going to overcome Martin's casual expectation to win every time! In fact, in spite of disconcerting breezy conditions I won two out of four games, which is my best result so far!

### Tuesday 28th April

We played table tennis after lunch. Justine won two games (Her words – it doesn't happen very often!)

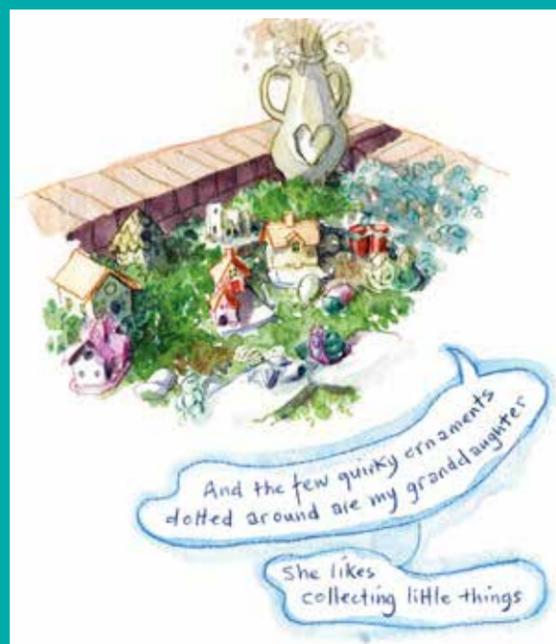
EXTRACT FROM JUSTINE AND MARTIN'S DIARY

## Social relationships and care practices

- The garden is a space that can **facilitate social connections**. Mealtimes were very much part of the social aspect of the garden, spending time together as a couple, or eating outside with friends and family.
- The **borders of gardens** – hedges, fences, front gardens – facilitated **social connections with neighbours**. Participants talked about chatting to neighbours over the garden fence or in the front garden.
- The connectivity of the garden **became particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic**, enabling people connect safely at a distance with neighbours, or spend time with friends and family outdoors.

### Example: Frank and Emma's fairy garden

This image is a fairy garden created by Frank and Emma's grand-daughter who they look after together on a regular basis. This reflects an ongoing relationship in which they have provided care and support to their daughter, but in turn she also helps them. Their grand-daughter bought the ornaments and created the fairy garden, illustrating how gardens are shaped by mutual caring relationships. Frank and Emma are also actively involved in caring for wildlife in their garden, and looking after their ragdoll cats.



- However, the **connectivity of the garden was not always harmonious**, and people talked about disputes around the maintenance garden borders, unfriendly neighbours, or unwanted wildlife.
- Living with dementia could **change social relationships** in the garden. For instance, **couples often spent more time together** in the garden, to help enable their partner to continue to use the garden safely (see page 16).
- While people living with dementia sometimes received support from family carers to continue using their garden, they were also involved in **mutually supportive relationships with family members, friends, neighbours, plants, pets and wildlife**.

## Adaptations, risk and everyday creativity



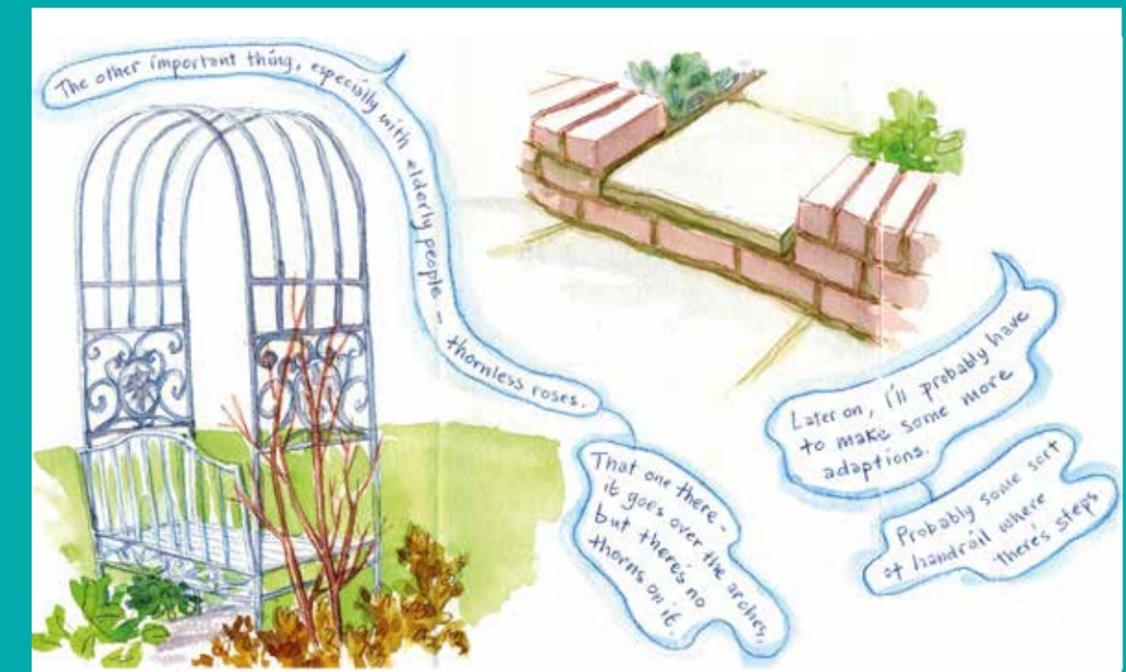
- People living with dementia and family carers sometimes made **creative adaptations to their gardens and routines**, in order to help the person living with dementia to continue gardening.
- **Spending time together** in the garden was a way of **managing risks**, and enabling the person living with dementia to keep using the garden safely.
- Participants talked about **'simplifying' their garden to make it easier to manage** – this included having less vegetables, and growing more plants that are 'easy' to maintain.
- Gardens were adapted to manage risk, but rather than stopping the person living with dementia from doing things outside, it was about **enabling them to continue using the garden safely** – being 'safely imaginative'<sup>2</sup>.
- There is not a fixed point at which the garden is 'risk free', rather it was an **ongoing process 'tinkering' and 'adjusting' gardens** over time, as people's needs change.
- Adaptations were also about **enhancing the enjoyment of gardens**, not just managing risks (see example).
- The facilitation of enabled risk **may change as dementia progresses**, and if outside care workers become involved. It also changes significantly in care settings, where there is an increased focus on managing risk.

## Example: Emma and Frank, creative adaptations

Emma (family carer) and Frank (person living with dementia) had made a number of adjustments to their garden, to adapt to the challenges of living with dementia, and growing older. Emma was in the process of creating a sensory garden, with fragrant flowers and herbs, plants that rustled in the wind, and brightly coloured furniture.

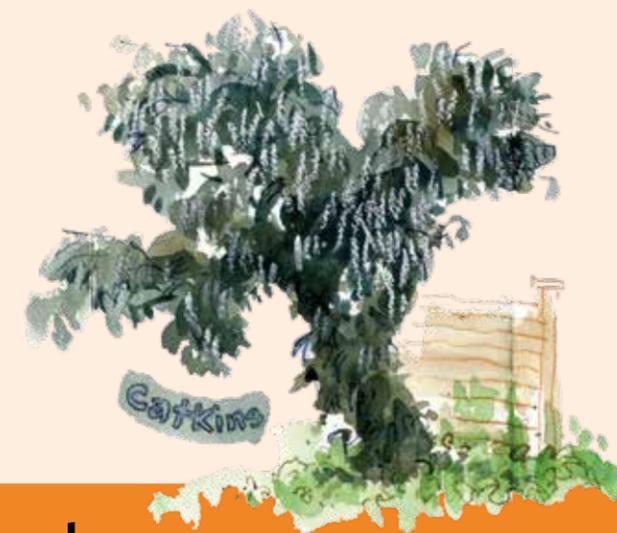
During the walking interview she was continually assessing and adjusting the garden to manage potential risks, for instance, moving a pot that Frank might fall over. She was planning to put in handrails by the steps, in anticipation of future risks of falling. Solutions were not always technical – Emma had replaced the rose over an archway into the garden with a thornless rose, describing thorns as a 'hazard' to herself and her husband.

Emma says that these adaptations make the garden not just 'dementia friendly' but also 'age friendly' and 'child friendly' for their grand-daughter.



## Endnotes

- 1 Newton, R., Keady, J., Tseklevs, E and Adams, S. (2021) 'My father is a gardener...': a systematic narrative review on access and use of the garden by people living with dementia. *Health and Place*, 68, 102516 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2021.102516>
- 2 Rendell, M. and Carroll, D. (2015) Why don't we go into the garden? *Journal of Dementia Care*, 23(2), 16-18.



## Get in touch

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