

Christos Gallis (ed.): Green care for human therapy, social innovation, rural economy, and education

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While the connection between horticulture and human health has been known for most of human history only recently have researchers begun to systematically examine this connection from the perspective of Western science and institutions. The edited collection of articles, *Green Care for Human Therapy, Social Innovation, Rural Economy and Education*, assembled by Gallis Christos, includes a wide-ranging collection of recent scientific research on the links between horticulture and society, through the lens of what has come to be known as ‘green care.’ This volume is an important and timely contribution to the study of horticulture and human health, especially as alternatives to industrial agriculture and the conventional medical model of healthcare are sought by planners, farmers, policy makers, and healthcare providers.

The book focuses on rural green care farms, with several articles emphasizing the potential for farmers to collaborate with health care providers for more economically sustainable operations (an insight that is probably most relevant for the current European context). Green care is defined early on as “the use of agricultural farms and the biotic and abiotic elements of nature for health and therapy-promoting interventions as a base for promoting human mental and physical health, as well as quality of life” (p. 6). An introductory chapter by the editor emphasizes that while it may be easy to make generalizations about the positive or therapeutic effects of working with plants, more specific research is needed to measure the specific ways that horticulture can be therapeutic. To accomplish this goal,

contributions from dozens of researchers and practitioners are presented in four sections on (1) the origins, definitions or theories of green care, (2) effects of green care on human health, (3) the social, political and educational aspects of green care and (4) green care in the world.

One particularly strong focus of the book is how green care can expand the capacity and effectiveness of health-care in developed Western countries. For example, the chapter by Marianne Thorsen Gonzalez finds green care to be effective for treating clinical depression, and it thoughtfully presents evidence from two well-documented studies of patients before, during and after green care treatment. The 12-week program for patients included both active and passive elements such as sowing, germinating, potting, planting, composting beds, cultivating vegetables, rooting various cuttings of flowers or herbs, bird watching, weather observations, walking around, and picking flower bouquets. Gonzalez explains that the psychotherapy and medication approach of conventional healthcare can be one-dimensional while green care allows for a multidimensional “complex intervention” that consists of a number of different “active ingredients” (p. 112). In the particular case of patients with depression, there were multiple ways that depressive rumination was shown to be interrupted as patients immersed in many different kinds of activities at different intensities, leading to the activation of behaviors that help manage depression.

A more clinical focus in the book is effectively contextualized with the section of articles on the social, political and educational aspects of green care. For example, one outstanding chapter in this section titled “Social Aspects of Green Care” has more than 100 references to relevant literature on the social dimensions of horticulture and human health. The emphasis in this article on lifestyle diseases (associated with wealthy developed Western

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societies) makes a strong argument for healthcare providers or policy makers that green care could be a vital part of twenty-first century health care systems. Additionally, the contributions of social marginality to mental health problems highlight a theme in many of the chapters—the role of farming for sociability or inclusion for people with various diagnosed illnesses or disabilities. This is especially relevant in the context of Western institutions that have historically stigmatized the very individuals that they seek to treat, exacerbating any existing conditions.

Unfortunately the initial printing of the book is only available in an expensive hardcover version, making it more accessible to researchers than to the policy makers, farmers, and healthcare practitioners who seem to be the intended audience. Most of the articles are written in a way that may not appeal to a wide audience, with many articles requiring a specific interest or commitment to read through the many tables, and occasional editing or translation issues. Some articles do provide an excellent overview of aspects of therapeutic horticulture, and could make an excellent resource for course instructors. Researchers and

policy makers looking to develop more evidence-based approaches to the use of horticulture as part of the healthcare system will also find this book an excellent resource.

Overall the book is an important contribution to an emerging field. One potential shortcoming is the specific focus on rural European farms that has the potential to miss out on the kinds of therapeutic horticulture that are happening in more dense urban areas, from community gardens to hospital greenhouses and prison horticulture. As Paula Diane Relf notes in the final chapter of the book, green care is not widely recognized in the United States, pointing to the need for context-specific research on the contributions of horticulture to human health outside of Europe. The book as a whole, however, does provide a strong model for future systematic research about the integration of healthcare systems and horticulture.

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