

NATURE'S CURE~ALL

The healing effect of horticultural therapy.

BY LISA MACHADO

In 2016, Paul Eisener's life was turned upside down by a blood cancer diagnosis. His life quickly shifted from a hectic work schedule and frequent travel throughout Ontario, the U.S. and Mexico as a program manager for an automotive supplier to blood tests, oncologists and cancer clinics. Facing an uncertain future and struggling with debilitating fatigue caused by daily oral chemotherapy medication, he found peace in the one place that soothed the anxiety of an uncertain future: his garden.

"In that first year with cancer, the garden was my safe place," he says. "I was always tired, in a little bit of pain and dealing with side effects while getting used to my medication. It was a place I could go, work and not think about my illness. And Millie, our pug, was happy to keep me company, too."

Eisener, who lives with his partner, Heather, in Barrie, Ontario, has had an interest in gardening since he was a child. He worked alongside his grandfather, a produce



Paul Eisener and his pug, Millie, recharge in the sanctuary of his garden in Barrie, Ontario.

farmer in Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia. It was love at first plant, inspiring a decades-long passion for getting his hands dirty and making things grow. Little did he know just how important this hobby would become as he struggled to stay emotionally healthy and resilient while managing a life-threatening disease.

"Being outside in the fresh air and sunshine and getting dirty is pretty awesome, and it helped me mentally and emotionally during that time," says Eisener.

It's a feeling that Mitchell Hewson knows well. In fact, Hewson has made harnessing nature-inspired wellness his life's work.

As the first registered horticultural therapist to practise in Canada, Hewson is personally responsible for introducing nature as a healing tool to hundreds of Canadians struggling with life-altering conditions, such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, dementia and addiction. In 1974, he started Canada's first horticultural therapy program, at Homewood Health Centre in Guelph, Ontario. Today, the centre is one of the largest mental health and addiction facilities in Canada and is home to a conservatory greenhouse and 47 acres of garden and wooded areas, where patients can plant seedlings, care for houseplants and create floral arrangements as part of their therapy.

"Nature is spiritual," says the 68-year-old Hewson. "Not in a religious way, but in a healing way. When used as a therapy, it becomes an important treatment tool for rehabilitation by teaching new skills and also by increasing hope and a sense of wellness through engaging in the natural world."

This understanding of the important role that nature plays in healing has given rise to the creation of what are being called "healing gardens" at hospitals and other care facilities across Canada. The Max Tanenbaum Garden on the 16th floor of Toronto's Princess Margaret Cancer Centre is just one such garden of healing, an initiative largely informed by insights from Hewson.

Designed to be a place of respite for people undergoing treatment for cancer and their families, the garden breathes under an open sky, offering a quiet view of the busy city bustling below amid bright flowers and vibrant greenery. The many benches and tables match the hexagon shape of the wood floor,

with plenty of space in between to accommodate wheelchairs and hospital beds. For those who are unable to go outside, there's the enclosed Max Tanenbaum Healing Garden on the 14th floor, which is visible from the surrounding in-patient rooms.

"Nature teaches us about hope and renewal," says Hewson. "There's a plethora of things that nature does that chemo can't. It's about nurturing the spirit."

Dr. Gary Rodin agrees. As Princess Margaret's head of supportive care, Rodin has long understood the connection between nature and emotional and physical well-being, especially when it comes to cancer.

"We know that the patient and caregiver experience can get lost as we focus on treatments and helping someone get better," he says. "Your life becomes the cancer. You lose humanity."

Rodin says a simple walk through the rooftop garden, or

the opportunity to gaze upon the healing garden while you lie in bed, has a unique restorative power that can take a person out of the cancer experience for a moment and remind them of living.

"Nature is especially powerful for those who are acutely ill," Rodin says. "To feel the sun or a gentle breeze makes you feel alive. These things are a reminder to patients of the human aspects of themselves and their connection to the world, to life and to living."

It has been two and a half years since Eisener's diagnosis, and although his health is stable and he has returned to work at a less hectic pace, there are still moments of anxiety and worry about his future. In times like these, he heads outside.

"The emotional benefits from gardening are truly amazing," he says. "My garden is still my safe place. It's my own little place of Zen." **H**

Emotional Rescue

Mitchell Hewson, Canada's first registered horticultural therapist, shares his suggestions for pairing plants with emotions.

Anxiety: Basil, camomile and roses

Fatigue and energy levels: Grapefruit, orange and jasmine

Depression: Lavender, sage and camomile

Hopelessness: Dwarf orange tree (also known as Calamondin orange and calamansi)

