

Gardening

with Agnes Stevenson

Digging and sowing can be great therapy

ANYONE with a garden knows how good they feel after spending time digging, planting and pulling out weeds.

At the end of a day's gardening, your muscles might ache but your head feels much clearer.

Well, it turns out that feel-good factor is much more powerful than we'd realised and in one garden in Ayrshire it's being used to help restore veterans of some of the world's fiercest conflicts to health.

Gardening Leave is a charity that uses horticultural therapy to help heal the wounds of ex-servicemen and women who have been mentally scarred by their battlefield experiences.

Troubled

It was set up in 2007 at the Scottish Agricultural College near Ayr by Anna Baker Cresswell who had been troubled for many years by the lasting impact of war on a friend who served in the Falklands.

"My friend was in the Welsh Guards and came back from the South Atlantic a different person," Anna told me last week.

Determined to do something about the problem, she qualified as a horticultural therapist, found a site for the project and then, with the support of a grant from the Pears Foundation, Gardening Leave was in business.

"That first day I wasn't sure if anyone would turn up," says Anna.

However, a few people did come and gradually their numbers swelled to the point where last year Gardening Leave saw hundreds of veterans pass through its gates.

Those who come raise vegetables for nearby Hollybush House, the Scottish headquarters of Combat Stress, another charity that helps ex-servicemen and women with mental health problems.

While news from Afghanistan and Iraq dominates current



■ Growing and tending to plants can be very relaxing.

headlines, it's soldiers from more distant conflicts that tend to turn to Gardening Leave.

"On average it takes 14 years between someone leaving the forces and looking for help.

"Our oldest veteran was 91 and his post traumatic stress didn't manifest itself until he was in his 80s, after his wife died," says Anna.

Horticultural therapy works in many ways and it owes much of its effect to routine and discipline.

"Just getting here at the right time can be a real achievement for some people," says Anna, who then works out who is best suited to gentle tasks like sowing seeds and who would benefit from the physical challenge of heavy digging.

Among those who visit Gardening Leave is Andy, who served with the Royal Highland Fusiliers in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and the first Gulf War.

"I come here because I enjoy being with people like me," says Andy.

"You don't have to explain yourself as everyone is in the same boat. If I was at home I'd be sitting with a can in my hand thinking about the army."

Andy is helping restore the Victorian greenhouses while other veterans make compost and look after the large collection of poppies (above).

Now Anna has been asked to establish two more projects.



■ Winifred Sloan, Anna Baker Cresswell and John Scott MSP.



One will be at the Royal Hospital Chelsea and the other at Erskine Hospital for ex-servicemen and women near Glasgow.

"It shows how powerful gardening can be as a therapy that it's making such a difference in the lives of so many people," says Anna.

"I started the charity as a tribute to my mother who was passionate about gardening and I think she'd be very pleased with the results."

■ For more info visit www.gardeningleave.org

Are nettles good for butterflies?



MY HUSBAND wants to cut down all the nettles in our garden and add them to the compost heap but I think they provide food for butterflies. Who is right?

— Mrs MacPhail, Inverness.

You both are. Nettles are an essential source of food for the caterpillars of many butterflies, including tortoiseshell and peacock, but they're also full of nitrogen and make excellent plant food, either added to the compost heap or soaked in water to make a powerful brew. Why not add some nettles to the compost heap and leave the rest for the wildlife.

I'D LIKE to take my gorgeous peony, which has flowered well for many years, with me when I move house but I've heard they don't travel well.

— Mrs D. James, Ayr.

They're best moved during winter but if you want to give it a try, prepare the new soil well, digging in lots of compost or manure, and dig up the plant with as large a rootball as possible. Water well once you've replanted it and then sit back and patiently watch it sulker for several years before it starts to flower again.

I'VE GROWN sweet peas (below) for the first time this year — how do I keep them flowering?

— Clare Williams, Edinburgh.

Pick them regularly, water well and give them a regular dose of liquid feed and they should reward you with hundreds of scented blooms.



LAST YEAR my roses started off healthy but the leaves turned yellow as the summer wore on.

— G. McKechnie, Hamilton.

It could be a lack of iron in the soil and you can solve this by watering in any of the brands of sequestered iron you can find at the garden centre. If your leaves develop black spots, as well as turning yellow, it's probably blackspot, which is a fungal condition that's very difficult to cure. The best way to tackle it is by picking off affected leaves, removing all fallen leaves in the autumn and feeding well in spring to keep your roses healthy.

MY ROSEMARY bush died during the winter and a friend has offered me cuttings from hers — how do I grow them on?

— Elizabeth Smith, Grangemouth.

Rosemary cuttings taken at this time of the year will root easily. Select non-flowering shoots around 10 cm long, remove the lower leaves and insert them into compost, watering well. Cover them with plastic and they should develop roots in around a month. Pot up and place in a sunny spot, making sure they don't dry out, and they should be ready for planting out this autumn.

SEND YOUR gardening photos and tips to Gardening, The Sunday Post, 2 Albert Square, Dundee, DD1 9QJ. Or send us an email at gardening@sundaypost.com

Please do not send an SAE as Agnes cannot send personal replies.

Winners

THE WINNERS of our recent Grow Light Garden Giveaway are Mary MacLean, Kirkintilloch, Janet Smith, Inverness, and Wendy Hogarth, Bishop Auckland in County Durham.

Grow Lights will be on their way to all three shortly.



Chelsea show garden supports homeless

THE CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW gets under way tomorrow and this year's highlights include the biggest show garden created at the event.

The *Places Of Change* garden was created by The Eden Project and built by homeless people and ex-offenders. It will feature plants grown for

food, floristry and medicine and was designed by Paul Stone.

"We want to show the importance of the relationship between people and horticulture," says Paul.

"We could have spent the budget for the show on lots of wonderful plants, but we spent it on

people instead. These are the sort of people society tends to give up on but we like to think of them as buried treasure."

Find out if the *Places Of Change* garden wins gold by watching Alan Titchmarsh and his fellow presenters on BBC all this week, starting 5.30 pm tonight.

To do . . .

IF YOU have variegated evergreens it's time to remove green leaves to stop the plant reverting to that colour.

Tie in new shoots on honeysuckle and clematis and set out bedding plants and hanging baskets as long as no frost is forecast in your area.

Containers should be watered regularly, even during wet periods.

Remove blanket weed from ponds, leaving it on the edge of the pond for 24 hours to let wildlife to escape before adding it to the compost heap.