# Healing Havens

## NIH Prescribes Gardens to Soothe the Sick

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The custom of bringing flowers to the sick is part of a centuries-old belief that it is possible to create a healing environment. But what if instead of bringing blooms to the patient, you brought the patient to the blooms?

With recent major building projects at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, designers have incorporated a variety of gardens and landscaped spaces that seek to connect people who are seriously ill to the soothing qualities of the green world.

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|  | http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/photo/largerPhoto/images/enlarge_tab.gifHealing gardens at NIHWinding paths and intimate seating areas provide needed privacy. (Katherine Frey - For The Washington Post)  |

In recent decades, scientific research has begun to demonstrate the therapeutic importance of incorporating the natural world into the healing process, said John Gallin, director of the Mark O. Hatfield Clinical Center at the 310-acre campus.

Gallin asked Robert Frasca of architects Zimmer, Gunsul, Frasca to consider this newest research and integrate therapeutic open areas into the overall design of the new center. "The whole idea was to make it a healing place. While the NIH has a large campus setting, there were few patient-accessible, user-friendly outdoor spaces," Frasca said.

As a result, the 242 beds in the Hatfield Center, which opened to patients in April, are placed in front of oversize picture windows positioned low enough to allow even bedridden patients to look down on the building's twin open-air courtyard gardens.

On the ground level, undulating paths curve around beds planted with a rich mix of ground covers, ferns, shrubs and specimen trees. Interspersed are benches for patients, medical staff and family members to revive themselves with a breath of fresh air and soothing greenery of year-round interest. The courtyard gardens were designed by landscape architect Roger Courtenay of EDAW, Inc. in Alexandria.

The two rectangular gardens -- each approximately 16,000 square feet -- extend from either side of a central, seven-story atrium. Known as the Science Court, it is a light-filled cavern of glass meant to boost the spirits of both the patients and staff who gather here. They are drawn to the calming murmur of flowing water, a waterfall that empties into a stream-like channel of bronze that meanders under a low bridge. This sculpture, called "The Oasis," was created by husband and wife artists Susan and Gene Flores of Plainfield, Mass., who are both cancer survivors.

In keeping with the oasis concept, dozens of 20-foot-tall potted palms are arrayed around groupings of tables and chairs. Even the Clinical Center's windowless basement, which houses the radiation oncology unit, offers an expansive stone-and-blue-tile waterfall structure to provide the needed natural element.

"A real effort was made to bring the outside indoors," Gallin said.

Just a short distance from the Clinical Center is the new Claudio and Evelyne Cohen Garden, designed as an extension of the 34-room Edmond J. Safra Family Lodge, which opened in June. The Safra Lodge is designed to look like an English manor house, while the layout of the adjoining 6,500-square-foot garden "recalls mid-19th-century parklike settings," said Madison Cox, its New York-based designer.

Sinuous paths wind around a large rolling lawn in the center, with half-hidden areas. The idea, Cox said, was to offer a "great number of little areas, which afford privacy not available in a hospital setting and gives people breathing space."

Just off the path is a curved patio arrayed with wrought-iron cafe tables and chairs and surrounded by hydrangeas and tall, graceful river birches. Another patio and seating area adjoins a rose garden, which can be seen from the lodge's dining room. On one side of the garden is a charming rough-hewn square gazebo, the benches still showing their original bark. On the other side is a second, larger rustic gazebo, screened by rhododendrons, adorned with climbing roses and housing more benches.

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The garden's color schemes are carefully muted and subdued, with no strong or vivid hues. Instead, soothing blues, creams and whites provide a calm background that recedes a bit. "It provides relief or comfort without being overpowering," said Cox.

The plantings of shrubs and trees -- perennials would make it "too high maintenance," said Cox -- include kousa and flowering dogwoods as well as fragrant plants, such as summersweet.

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"I hope this garden will bring hope to everyone who passes through there," said philanthropist Lily Safra. She donated $1.25 million. An additional donation of $3.5 million from the Safra Foundation was a catalyst for the lodge's construction. It provides temporary residence for the families of adult patients taking part in clinical trials at NIH, some of whom stay for months.

For Lily Safra, the garden is both a reminder and a tribute to the awful fragility of life. It is named in memory of her late son and daughter-in-law. A burbling stone fountain is dedicated to the memory of her late grandson. In 1989, Claudio Cohen, 36, and his son Raphael, 5, died in a car accident. Wife and mother Evelyne Cohen died two years later of cancer, still overcome with grief. She received treatment at NIH during her illness.

Five years ago, Lily Safra's husband, billionaire banker Edmond Safra, died in a tragic fire at the age of 67. Cox recalls Lily Safra telling him, "it was in a garden setting that I began to heal." She directed him to develop a garden that was to look residential and homelike.

"I wanted to give (patients and their families) space, peace, time to reflect, dignity and hope. They're in a very bad physical and psychological state, facing tremendous emotional challenges, and they need tranquility. I wanted to provide a welcoming home so loved ones can stay together," Lily Safra said.

Neighbor to the Safra Family Lodge and across the street from the Clinical Center is the recently expanded 59-room Children's Inn at NIH, which provides a homelike environment for children undergoing treatment, and their families. Behind the inn is a newly installed butterfly garden, with labor donated by the 75-year-old Town and Country Garden Club in cooperation with the National Wildlife Federation and the cable channel Animal Planet. The crew arrived to film the construction of the garden for an upcoming series on backyard habitats, set to air this fall.

"A lot of research shows that nature tends to buffer the impact of life's stress on children and helps them deal with adversity," said Lori Wiener, coordinator of the National Cancer Institute's psycho-social support and research program. And for children who have been in sterile hospital settings, being outdoors engages all their senses, she said.

Members of the Town and Country Garden Club also installed a whimsical sculpture garden specially selected with children in mind. Hidden among the greenery are a variety of small sculpted woodland creatures. "Our intent was to draw children into the garden for some quiet time," said club president Margaret Glacken.

David Mizejewski, senior manager of the NWF's habitat education program, supervised the construction of the butterfly garden and helped design plantings. He incorporated inkberry hollies to provide shelter and cover for the insects, and spicebushes to serve as host plants for caterpillars.

Children staying at the inn will help provide food for the butterflies, in the form of mashed fruit in a specially designed feeder. These encounters with nature will "provide therapy and bring joy, excitement, distraction and a feeling of accomplishment," Mizejewski said.