

FOREWORD TO ‘*GROWING TOGETHER*’ A PRACTICE GUIDE TO PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH GARDENING AND HORTICULTURE

The calming and restorative powers of plants and of nature are increasingly valued as a means of helping people escape from the pressure and competition of our technology-driven world, where it is so easy to forget that all living things are connected.

This guide is being published at a time when throughout the world some wonderful projects are making use of the social and therapeutic power of horticulture to enhance people’s lives through regaining their connection with the earth.

When the Sheltered Work Opportunities Project started 20 years ago, there was no such guide available – indeed there were very few other independent charity-based horticultural projects when we opened Cherry Tree Nursery in 1990.

We provide meaningful work rehabilitation in a shrub nursery for adults with severe and enduring mental illness. We are committed to offering a supportive family environment where each person feels needed, valued, important and included, and can regain their place in society and in the local community. We provide routine, structure and a wide range of work skills. We strive to counter the stigma and discrimination so often experienced by people with mental illness, and to offer a space where people can learn to laugh again and to support and care for each other while sharing in the joy of growing plants.

We started with only four clients, a short-term lease of two acres of land, one member of staff and a £1,000 interest-free loan from a supporter. Now, 20 years later, we have over a hundred and fifty clients, a lease of four-and-a-half acres of land and six staff. We have gained recognition in many ways including the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Award in 2003, and, in November 2004, the Lilly Reintegration Award Recognising Outstanding Achievement in Mental Health.

We believe these achievements reinforce the benefits of social and therapeutic horticulture in improving well-being and mental health and we see ourselves reflected throughout this excellent publication.

However, it is important to recognise that horticulture is not always an idyllic pastime. Statistics show that the suicide rates among farmers and growers are just as high as in any other industry. The pressures and stress caused by targets and competition are just as high in rural industries as in any other areas of work, and unless both rural and urban industries can address the issues of stress and pressure in the workplace, the incidence of mental illness will only continue to increase. This is something we must never forget.

We warmly welcome the publication of this guide, which we would have found extremely useful when we first started out. We hope it will inspire the creation of many more projects in the future that work towards caring for people and caring for plants for the benefit of the vulnerable, excluded and forgotten members of our communities.