

Elizabeth Simpson compares her experience of horticultural therapy in two different contexts. Liz has a long history of psychiatric problems, nearly twenty years on tricyclic anti-psychotic drugs with the attendant institutionalisation and, more recently, care in the community. In the last year, Liz has also been diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer, which was in remission, but has now spread to her bones. In this article, she draws some comparisons between a mainstream non-organic allotment project, run by a mental health day-care service, and an independent organic food growing project, run by Sheffield Organic Food Initiative.

LIMBO VERSUS LIVING:

THE BENEFITS OF ORGANIC ALLOTMENTING FOR HEALTH.

“**Limbrick Limbo**, the magazine of the *Prozac Prose* Creative Writing Group” proudly announces the blurb. Indeed, Limbrick is almost a form of limbo, a kind of waiting for better things to arrive. Lipservice is paid to the autonomy of users,

but the common experience is one of being ignored, not being taken seriously, marginalised and sidelined, merely being contained and entertained. It is an exercise in how to protect the psychiatric patient from society and vice-versa.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the gardening group. ‘How does the group make decisions?’ a curious student researching community gardening wondered. ‘Oh, that’s easy,’ came the reply, ‘Frank (another user) tells us.’ Wherever this was repeated, there were wry smiles and agreement. The gardening group is run not by consensus, but by two very dominant males whose main aim in life is not only to subdue and tame the allotment, but to work a slow poisoning of the environment as well. Bonfires, slug pellets, Miracle Gro, artificial biocides, nothing is too hazardous for these guys.

‘Do you know that slug pellets contain aluminium, which has been linked to Alzheimer’s disease?’ I lectured. ‘Oh, I’m half way there already’, commented one Mr Dim Dominant.

I did, in fact, half believe him!

Enough of the bile, What of the other gardening group, run by S.O.F.I.’s Richard Clare? Without making too simplistic a contrast, this experience could scarcely be more different.

This experience has been not of an institutional removal of autonomy, but of empowerment. Not only has Richard been inspirational and encouraging in his enthusiasm for the subject and skillfulness of teaching, but I have also

found a friendship with many like-minded individuals who have been both tolerant and supportive. In such company, it is easier to blossom and reach full potential. It is also a deeply satisfying feeling to harvest crops one has planted, watered, fed and protected from slugs and disease. Confidence is gained by the learning and application of new skills, and good health promoted by the consumption of fresh food, free from contamination.

In conclusion, I would like to draw in the experience of walking in the town centre and being assaulted on one side by tinny music from a shop. Nearby was a solitary blues guitarist busking with a passion, rawness and authenticity entirely lacking from the slick performance of the well-rehearsed popular song. I could only draw an analogy between a pre-packaged, tasteless meal, packed with monosodium glutamate and a meal created from scratch with fresh, local, organic ingredients. One barely fills, while the other nourishes.

This case study illustrates many of the wider conflicts which have been common in horticultural care work over the past thirty years. It seems obvious that unless organic techniques are the foundation of this type of activity, clients will be subjected to mental and even physical dangers which could exacerbate their problems.

Our conclusion is that it is counter-productive and even immoral to expose vulnerable clients to the dangers of agrochemical fertilisers and biocides. By contrast, good organic methods are relatively safer and produce greater nutritional benefits in the food grown and consumed by clients.