In this chapter we explore the relationship between gardens and gardening activity in later life and the meanings older people ascribe to the domestic garden. As the work of Cheng et al. (2010) in Australia points out, retirement marks a significant rise in older people’s levels of interest and attachment not just to the garden, but also to activities associated with it. In the UK, 62 per cent of adults over the age of 65 years undertake gardening activity in their spare time, compared with just 16 per cent of those aged between 16 and 24 years of age (Seddon, 2011). This reinforces earlier survey work undertaken with adults in the UK demonstrating that, as an activity, gardening is largely seen as an ‘older person’s hobby’ (Mintel, 2003). This growth of interest has been mirrored by a burgeoning of television and radio programmes in the UK, North America and Australia, all devoted to gardens and garden ‘makeovers’, and a growing consumer industry built around the garden centre, horticultural shows, specialist botanical and other public gardens (Taylor, 2002; Clayton, 2007; Cheng et al. 2010). Where finances allow, significant numbers of those aged over 50 will use their increased leisure time to engage with these environments, either for their restorative qualities or to gain inspiration for their own domestic gardens. This chapter is specifically concerned with: the relational and embodied modes of engagement older people have with their domestic gardens and how this can change over the lifecourse, particularly post-retirement; the meanings people attach to their gardens in later life; and the gendered nature of this relationship.

Gardens and identity across the lifecourse

As an extension of the home, the garden is viewed as a place where people can grow old gracefully—relaxing after a lifetime of hard work. In part, this reflects the perception of gardening as a leisure activity that has particular health and wellbeing benefits in retirement. But the meaning attached to the domestic garden and how gardening activity is performed within that space also plays an important social and cultural role in the lives of older people, albeit one that can change over time.

This is reflected in recent work that demonstrates how the relational engagement people have with their gardens, the meanings they attach to it, and their embodied practices within it change across the lifecourse. In childhood, for example, the garden can represent a site of play
and escapism away from the parental gaze (Bingley and Milligan, 2007); in adulthood it can represent a site of family leisure, entertaining and a indicator of status and identity; while from middle age it can represent a site of social engagement and a hobby, consuming considerable time and resources (Milligan et al., 2004; Bhatti, 2006). Concepts often associated with the domestic garden, such as retreat, escapism, identity and ownership, assume different meanings at different stages of the lifecourse (Gross and Lane, 2007). However, as work in both the UK and New Zealand illustrates, the nature of the connection and the culture of the garden generally appears to evolve as people age (Connell, 2004; Freeman et al., 2012); and to some extent this occurs regardless of whether engagement with the garden derives from childhood experience or having been brought up within a strong culture of gardening. Levels of engagement, of course, can vary, from those who view the garden as an endless ‘burden’ to be managed, to the casual gardener who enjoys ‘pottering’ and keeping the garden tidy, to the hobbyist who likes to read about gardening and keep up with current trends, to the serious gardener for whom gardening forms an important part of their identity (Cheng et al., 2010). With the exception of the former, in most cases gardens, as both sites for public consumption and domestic spaces of gardening activity, have increasing appeal as an occupational pursuit in later life.

Gardens can assume particular significance with passages into the third or fourth age. Bhatti (2006) points to the ways in which retirement, or the onset of disability, disturbs established relationships of home, garden and the (ageing) body, with the physical or cognitive ability to undertake tasks increasingly falling out of sync with the desire to do so. So while the garden may manifest as a site of embodied practice and physicality in younger old age, with declining ability it can shift from being a site of leisure and identity to one that may be difficult to manage.

Older people can have strong feelings about the garden, and as a consequence experience considerable loss when no longer able to continue gardening. For those unable to draw on external help, the domestic garden can become a site of struggle to maintain a sense of home, self-identity and independence. As such, it can become a ‘lost space’, a blot on the landscape that has become unsightly and covered with weeds. The garden, then, particularly where publicly visible, can for an older person become a powerful symbol of the growing loss of control over their own body and life. Where the garden has represented an important part of the practice of everyday life in old age—and a visible expression of self and status—this can result in a lowering of self-esteem for the individual. Percival (2002) maintains that as people move into the fourth age, rather than being a site of pleasure, the growing inability to undertake even a short period working in the garden without experiencing aches and pains acts as a forcible reminder of the embodiment of old age.

Yet despite this, the evidence suggests that older people know and monitor their bodies, adjusting their gardening practices to enable them to continue gardening for as long as possible. For some this may involve finding help to maintain their garden, either through payment for services (though this is dependent on socio-economic circumstances) or with support from a relative or neighbour. For others, it involves taking positive action in the face of increasing limitations, for example by engaging in adaptive gardening practices to enable them to manage the garden and maintain their ability to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The intensive activity required to maintain vegetable plots, annual and border plants is replaced by low-maintenance shrubs and perennials, raised beds, increased areas of lawn or paving with pots, tubs and hanging baskets (see Figure 41.1). For others this involves downsizing to a home with a smaller or no garden. Yet even here, older gardeners can find ways to continue gardening, as Milligan et al. note: ‘There were a surprising number of very enterprising gardeners who, despite only having
a tiny backyard, grew carrots, potatoes, fruit bushes and, in one case, even a cherry tree using old buckets and a variety of containers’ (2003:32).

Bhatti (2006) suggests that this determination to continue gardening in older age represents a form of resistance to ageing—a sign that despite the limitations of the ageing body, older people draw on their experience and ingenuity to find ways to maintain their independence and expression of individuality. In this way, the domestic garden becomes a source of pride, a way of demonstrating to themselves, family and the wider community that the creative mind is still alive and the body able to complete difficult physical tasks.
Gardens as sites of meaning and affect in later life

Understanding why domestic gardens and gardening activity play an increasingly important role in the lives of older people requires an appreciation of the various relationships older people have with their gardens, how they engage with them, and the meanings they attach to them. Stenner et al. (2012) usefully propose four distinct modes of engagement characterising how people relate to their garden and gardening experiences: the naturalistic, the nostalgic, the pragmatic and the mimetic. The naturalistic mode characterises the garden as expressive of ‘nature’. Here, an older person’s relationship with their garden is viewed as a means of occupying an accessible natural environment (as opposed to a nature that requires a certain level of physical fitness to simply get there). For older people living in poor local environments, having some private space within which they can enjoy the peace and tranquillity of nature can be particularly important (Milligan et al., 2004). Bhatti and Church (2000) suggest that these micro-social worlds can also be a reflection of an individual’s response to the tensions and conflicts that exist beyond.

The nostalgic mode embodies the garden as a site of memory and self-reflection. Here, engagement with the garden is passive. The garden provides a peaceful haven in which older people can simply sit and reflect on the beauty of nature, gaze on a treasured plant or particular part of a garden that may bring back memories of times past or a lost loved one. This mode places particular significance on sensory engagement with the garden—highlighting the importance of colour, smell, flowers and birdsong and how these change with the passing seasons (Milligan et al., 2005; Tilley, 2006).

The pragmatic mode characterises the garden as a site of work, focused around the tasks and activities that constitute the routine practices of gardening—such as tending the lawn, digging the vegetable plot, weeding flower beds and cultivating seedlings within a greenhouse. As Gross and Lane (2007) note, in retirement the garden can act as a site of replacement work, in which a rewarding purpose or ‘career’ may be enacted through effort and achievement. As a form of employment, it can give the individual a sense of satisfaction and control and the opportunity to demonstrate that, though retired, s/he is still able to complete productive tasks.

Finally, the mimetic mode characterises the relational and interpersonal dynamics that occur within that space, and the processes of human social activity this involves. Here, engagement may range from activities such as passing on gardening knowledge to a friend, neighbour, grandchild etc. to engaging in social interaction ‘over the garden wall’ or with passing members of the local community. So while the domestic garden may be bounded, there is an important dynamic interconnection between the public space of the wider urban landscape and the private space of the home (Milligan et al., 2004).

Beyond social interaction, gardens are a site of creativity and self-expression—where the plants and objects displayed can be an important source of self-expression and reflection; a source of pride; and a way of showing that the creative mind is still alive and the body active. In this way, gardens help communicate messages about an individual’s personality, aesthetics and environmental values to others. The garden thus provides a lens for understanding those psychosocial worlds in and around the home that are an important part of the practice of everyday life in old age (Bhatti, 2006).

These differing modes of engagement, and the meaning attached to them, require us to consider the nature of these connections. The literature identifies a range of sometimes overlapping areas of connection with gardens, such as the sensory (Tilley, 2006); the emotional; the ‘eudaimonic’ or flourishing; the restorative (Kaplan, 1995); the practical (growing flowers and vegetables); and the leisurely/social (Connell, 2004; Ballantyne et al., 2008). Different types of connection may predominate depending on the individual’s purpose and relationship to
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gardens, e.g. whether the purpose is to visit open gardens or spend time in their own garden and/or gardening their own or a shared garden or allotment. As noted above, people’s engagement with the garden may vary not only across the lifecourse, but also across the seasons, presenting different opportunities to confer a sense of emotional flourishing and nourishment. In part, this may be due to the inherent ‘restorative’ factors identified within a garden, for example the feeling of being in a space away from the usual working or living environment, and surrounded by the complex variety afforded by natural colours, scents and patterns that are known to restore mental vitality and wellbeing (Kaplan, 1995). So while a spring or summer garden in full bloom may be the space we most associate with flourishing, the garden can present similar and various sensory, emotional stimuli throughout the year, even in the dead of winter. Evidence suggests that many older people appreciate this sensory richness, whether embodied within the practical elements of planting, maintenance and honing skills in tending plants, or simply sitting in or viewing the garden from a window, absorbing the peaceful pleasures of the garden as nature (Connell, 2004; Bhatti et al., 2009). A second affective aspect is linked to the garden as a site of social and family interaction. For older people with gardens, or for those able to visit open gardens, this can be important in contributing to their sense of flourishing as they share the garden space with friends and family. These social and eudaimonic advantages can be especially apparent when visiting ‘open’ or botanic gardens, or when involved in community gardening. Here, the older person has an opportunity to engage with the full range of sensory, eudaimonic, restorative qualities of the garden environment alongside social connectivity (Milligan et al., 2004). The restorative spaces of an open garden are often designed to enhance these elements, and as Connell (2004) notes, the ‘restful and peaceful’ aspects can be one of the more attractive elements of visiting gardens.

Gardens as gendered spaces in later life

Gardens, whether domestic, community or sites to visit, are spaces where gender relations are enacted in various ways throughout our lives. As Bhatti and Church (2000) argue, the garden can be viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere, literally another ‘living room’. Thus, the gendering of activities and management of the home space is played out in garden spaces no less for older than younger people (Deem, 1986). From this perspective it is perhaps unsurprising that research (in various Western settings) reports that women tend to spend more time than men in gardens (Armstrong, 2000), and also undertake more ‘serious’ gardening (drawing on committed horticulturist skills) (Mintel, 1997). But as a site of pleasure and frustration, the garden is also a site of paradox (Longhurst, 2006). Importantly, in terms of gender differences, the pleasures versus frustrations of gardening for older men and women tend to be influenced by different gender–related perceptions around the use and meaning of gardens, which have various impacts with age. While women may describe gardens and gardening in reflective, contemplative and social terms, they can also view the garden as a space of resistance and empowerment (Raisborough and Bhatti, 2007). For example, alongside developing her knowledge of gardening and plants, a woman may take control of the ordering and patterning of the garden, and in doing so disrupt the existing gendering of domestic tasks as the garden becomes a site of negotiation. Conversely, Bhatti and Church (2000) suggest that the language used by men in relation to the garden infers a sense of ‘controlling’ the garden space, extending and confirming existing perceptions of power over domestic space. In terms of the gendering of the domestic garden, then, the focus is on who manages tasks within the garden and how this reflects adjustments older men and women may be required to make to combat changing gardening abilities as they age (Bhatti et al., 2009).
For some older men, the garden is likely to be a place of activities and ‘doing’ or ‘controlling’. Men are more likely to refer to using tools and machinery to construct or destroy: mowing the lawn, doing heavy digging, mending netting, pruning, cutting back hedges and so forth. Thus, for active older people, particularly active older men, the garden as a space of ‘doing’ is important in conferring a sense of meaning and identity as they move into retirement. As Bhatti et al. (2006: 327) note, however, some men may portray the garden as a ‘chore’; or be driven to keep the garden tidy as a ‘duty’ to the household (2006: 335). The physical role men often undertake also means they may be more susceptible than women to a loss of enjoyment in the garden earlier in their older age, as physical constraints increasingly prevent them from undertaking the sorts of gardening activities they had previously enjoyed. Older women, of course, are no less affected by the impact of their changing ability to garden, but equally, as Infantino’s (2004: 16) work in the United States demonstrates, gardening experiences can enhance older women’s subjective wellbeing because they promote ‘wholeness, integration, peace, balance, and meaningfulness in their lives’. Infantino also suggests that gardening, as a leisure pursuit, is one that assists older women gardeners to age successfully. Not only do women tend towards a more serious and ‘loving’ commitment to gardening, but the garden space can also play an important role in their social and personal lives (Bhatti, 2006: 327).

While not the main focus of this chapter, it is worth noting that gardening on allotment sites also provides an interesting example of the gendering of gardens and gardening activity—one that is indirectly related to the domestic garden. Contrary to the ‘community garden’ common in North America (and elsewhere) that is worked together by a group of people, the allotment garden (common in the UK and other European countries) consists of an area of land (often but not exclusively urban) that is sub-divided into plots that are then made available for individual, non-commercial gardening, often for a small annual rental (Crouch and Ward, 2003). In the UK there has been a long tradition of allotments as implicitly ‘male only’ spaces (particularly for working class people) that kept them firmly away from the domestic sphere, though contributing to it through the growing of vegetables (Bhatti and Church, 2000). It is only in the past few decades that changes in allotment and community gardening have led to an increased presence of women on these sites.

For older people, community gardening presents a slightly different gendering from that expressed in the domestic garden, though the basic gender pattern may not change. Interestingly, as recent studies undertaken in Australia, Germany and the UK illustrate, older women are now more likely to take part in community projects or in allotment or ‘civic’ gardening (Milligan et al., 2004; Agustina and Beilin, 2012; Bendt et al., 2013). This relates not only to the fact that older women are still most likely to be responsible for maintaining the domestic sphere, but also that where they do become more involved in community gardening, this can be as part of their role in providing, growing and preparing food, as well as a way of enjoying more social connections (Heley and Jones, 2013). In later life then, this aspect of our relationship with gardens and gardening activity appears to reflect the varied and often changing age-related gender relationship with the home (Cheng et al., 2010).

Older people and the paradox of the garden

Longhurst’s (2006) work on domestic gardens in Aotearoa/New Zealand draws attention to the paradoxical nature of our relationship with gardens and gardening activity. Though not primarily focused on older people, her work has resonance for our discussion of the domestic garden, meaning and identity in later life. For Longhurst, one of the most obvious ways in which contemporary domestic gardens are viewed as paradoxical spaces is that they sit in ‘an ambiguous...
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The chapter highlights how this relates to the ways in which older people view the domestic garden, both as a site in which they can engage affectively with nature on the one hand, and where they use their skills and creativity to construct gardens imbued with meaning, and identity on the other. This connects to a further paradox we refer to here, in which the domestic garden can represent a site of leisure for older people (lazing and gazing), but also a site of replacement work, where pleasure is gained through productive endeavour post-retirement.

But gardens for older people can also be portrayed as ‘haven or heartache’ (Milligan et al. 2004: 1786). The unkempt domestic garden symbolises the embodiment of old age through a visual manifestation of growing dependence and a declining ability to cope, while the adaptive garden symbolises a resistance to ageing through the development of techniques for maintaining the garden that signals a continued ability to cope. Here, the garden paradox is also one of pleasure and frustration where the garden represents both a place imbued with the promise of peace and a flourishing connection with nature, and a visual reminder, as declining ability gives rise to the emergence of ‘lost spaces’, that ageing can erode that enjoyment.

There are paradoxes too in the gendering of the domestic garden. Patterns that already disrupt existing gendered domestic spaces may shift still further with age. For instance, the shift to adaptive gardening as a response to declining ability may also reframe the ‘men’s work’ of gardening activity (underpinned by an array of gizmos and gadgetry to ‘tame’ and order what might otherwise manifest as ‘wild spaces’) resulting in a loss of interest or involvement in the garden. Paradoxically, wives or partners may find that they gain more sense of ownership as they adapt to light gardening in pots and in more manageable spaces. This, of course, will be less visible in relation to more independent, single women gardeners who have spent a lifetime developing garden skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the modes through which the domestic garden becomes imbued with meaning and identity in later life and the complex and often paradoxical relationships that emerge through the literature. In doing so, it presents a particular view of the meanings older people ascribe to and the relationships they have with gardens. This view is predominantly (but not exclusively) white Anglophone. There is much scope for further exploration of the more nuanced meaning of gardens in later life—particularly across different ethnic, cultural and gendered groups. Similarly there is scope for work on the influences of social class and geographical location (from deprived to affluent, urban to rural) on older people’s relationships with their gardens. These topics offer fruitful areas for further research.

References


