

When I joined a group of volunteers a year ago at Ngataringa Community Garden (NCG) in Devonport, Auckland, I didn't know where it would lead me. I simply love plants, flowers and wanted to learn more how to propagate and care for them.

At NCG I noticed plenty of nettle growing and it was perceived as a nasty weed. In Poland where I was born, we respect and use nettle in a very different way as medicinal herb.

This is similar as in Germany and France where nettle is an official medicine often prescribed by conventional doctors. So my first idea was nettle propagation. Nettle promotion was also supported by Mc Cambria Community Garden and information of the health benefit of this plant spread locally very well. Nettle tea brew is always on our table every morning from fresh plant. Everybody loves it. Ngataringa garden is opened twice a week and local people can enter, visit the garden and ask questions. They all are amazed with its beauty and variety of other habitants such as butterflies and bees living here. Teachers often ask us if they can come to visit us with their students as part of an environmental topic/subject. They are always welcomed. Additional motivation for taking into consideration the educational aspect of the garden came with Eco Festival organised by Kaipatiki Project on March/April 2015. Our "Medicinal Weed" tours where we show and teach about the health benefits of common weeds such as Calendula, Nettle, Nasturtium, Plantain and Dandelion was very well received. Thinking holistically, to connect people as well, we introduced touch – hands massage - one technique from my Children Massaging Children programme. All elements of nature, plants, bees, butterflies, nettle tea, natural bees wax and hands massage all interconnected. Caring for nature is similar as to caring for people, for members of family, society and this topic is presented by David.

Demonstrating the process from sowing seeds to mature plant producing seeds is a beautiful parallel to natural life cycles.

That is what he says My two and a half years at Ngataringa Organic Garden, Devonport by David Noon April 2015

As part of Devonport Transition Town, I was one of those who took the Ngataringa Organic Garden over after Framework Trust pulled out over two years ago.

Our aim was to keep the garden going in order to continue to provide a place for people experiencing mental illness to come to, and to open the garden up to the whole community.

We all had to make a commitment to the ongoing success of the garden. I decided to give the garden 4 hours of my time every Wednesday. Due to my past experience with growing plants, I took on the role of propagating vegetable seedlings. This gentle activity has proven to be of interest to a quite lot of people who have been visitors to the garden for a while.

Some of these people need support. In the beginning, supervisors from North Shore Mental Health would bring small groups and support them with gardening. Now all that support has gone and as a Yoga Therapist with experience working as a Support and Development Worker for IHC, and as a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language to migrants and refugees, I have an interest in giving them my support. Many have helped me with the vegetable seedling growing and I'd like to share my experience with three of these:

The first was a regular from the time of Framework Trust. It took a while to entice him from the warmth and comfort of the tea room but he gradually spent more and more time with me. Initially he was very anxious but I found he had a love of heavy metal music and he would

bring tapes in for me to play on my old cassette player. His knowledge of the genre was extraordinary. We would listen and talk about the music, the bands and the people in them. After a while he would stay for a full two hours every Wednesday helping me prick out plants. He became calm and confident and he shared a lot about himself. I think he would still be coming to the garden if circumstances had permitted.

The second was a very anxious ex-professional. He had experienced a mental breakdown as a result of having some very unpleasant experiences. He was receiving counseling and had been advised to try some gardening. We got on straight away and he loved working with the seedlings but at first he would only stay for a very short time. Gradually he stayed longer each time until finally he would work the morning and then stay for lunch. I'm delighted to say that he has now recovered and is happily working in his profession again.

The third is a woman who has worked most of her life in factories. She experienced serious bouts of anxiety in these jobs and finally had to stop working and get help. When she first came to the garden she would find a task she could do on her own and she would stay for about an hour. Now she is a star at pricking out seedlings and she works all morning and stays for lunch. She has become very chatty and is a delight, but her factory work days have given her such a strong work ethic and I have to remind her that as a volunteer she can take a break whenever she wants one.

Ngataranga Organic Garden provides a safe environment for people to experience nature, to socialise, to have a change from daily routines, to heal inside and gain confidence.

I have only spoken of my involvement in this. There are lots of niches within the garden that people are attracted to. And there are other 'regulars' like me who provide support for whoever is interested.

I read a sign recently that expressed very nicely what I have tried to convey: "Gardens grow plants. Community gardens grow people." I'm happy to say that Ngataranga Organic Garden does both.

*Biophilia a love of life and the living world; the affinity of human beings for other life forms. Affinity - Feeling of closeness and understanding