

*A fascinating garden run by a mental health project in Rochdale is working so well that it is opening to the public.  
Linda Viney reports*

IT IS COMMON knowledge that gardening is good for you, whether you're growing to eat, for the great exercise or just to find a good excuse to get outdoors.

What better way to blow away the blues, especially at this time of year? This is certainly the case for those lucky enough to be part of the 'Growth Project' in Rochdale, as winter is one of their busiest times preparing the raised beds and borders for the main growing season ahead. Adding 40 tons of compost and farmyard manure is no mean feat.

They have produced much of the compost themselves with a succession of bins. Now in their tenth season, this mental health based project is like an oasis in one of the most deprived areas of Rochdale situated on a one acre, once derelict allotment site.

The Growth Project is a partnership between the charity Rochdale and District Mind and Hourglass Environmental Limited. The able-bodied individuals have been referred by the wellbeing co-ordinator Alison Connolly to Karen Hayday, director of Hourglass who runs the project and has a horticultural background.

Apart from contributing to Rochdale in Bloom they now open for the National Garden Scheme (NGS) showing visitors the benefits

# THE JOLLY GARDENERS

Above: Horticulturalist Debbie Cruise, director of Hourglass and co-ordinator of the project Karen Hayday and wellbeing co-ordinator Alison Connolly

Right: Looking over the brassicas protected by scarecrow







and what can be achieved. This is a real breakthrough as, to be part of the NGS, the gardens are judged by the county team to see if they are of a quality to be part of the scheme.

'We were thrilled as we were told immediately that they would like us to be included. We made homemade preserves and cakes for sale and sold fruit, vegetables and flowers. There were lunches, tea and cakes available to be eaten on the lawn,' Karen told me.

The day I went along, following a colourful painted sign they had made for the NGS open day, I knew I was in for a treat. As



I looked across the plot I was astounded at the standard, quality and selection of produce grown which would be fit for any show bench. In fact the allotment has been voted by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) as outstanding in one of the categories of North West in Bloom.

Sitting in the shed with a cup of tea, I noticed marks on the wall showing the levels they had been flooded, and unbelievably one of them was 10ft. 'We wept. The River Roach had broken its banks and everything was destroyed – polytunnels, greenhouses, even the metal storage container had been transported from one end to the other.

'Although the container had let in six inches of water all the tools were in place and everything was still on the shelves. It still stands where it was shifted to. Gardeners are a

Top: 'Woodland Green Station' where the joinery is carried out

Above: Denise and Karen lifting a netting frame used to keep carrots fly away from the crops

Left: A welcome sign for the Growth Project



hardy breed and everyone pulled their finger out and we have what you can see today.'

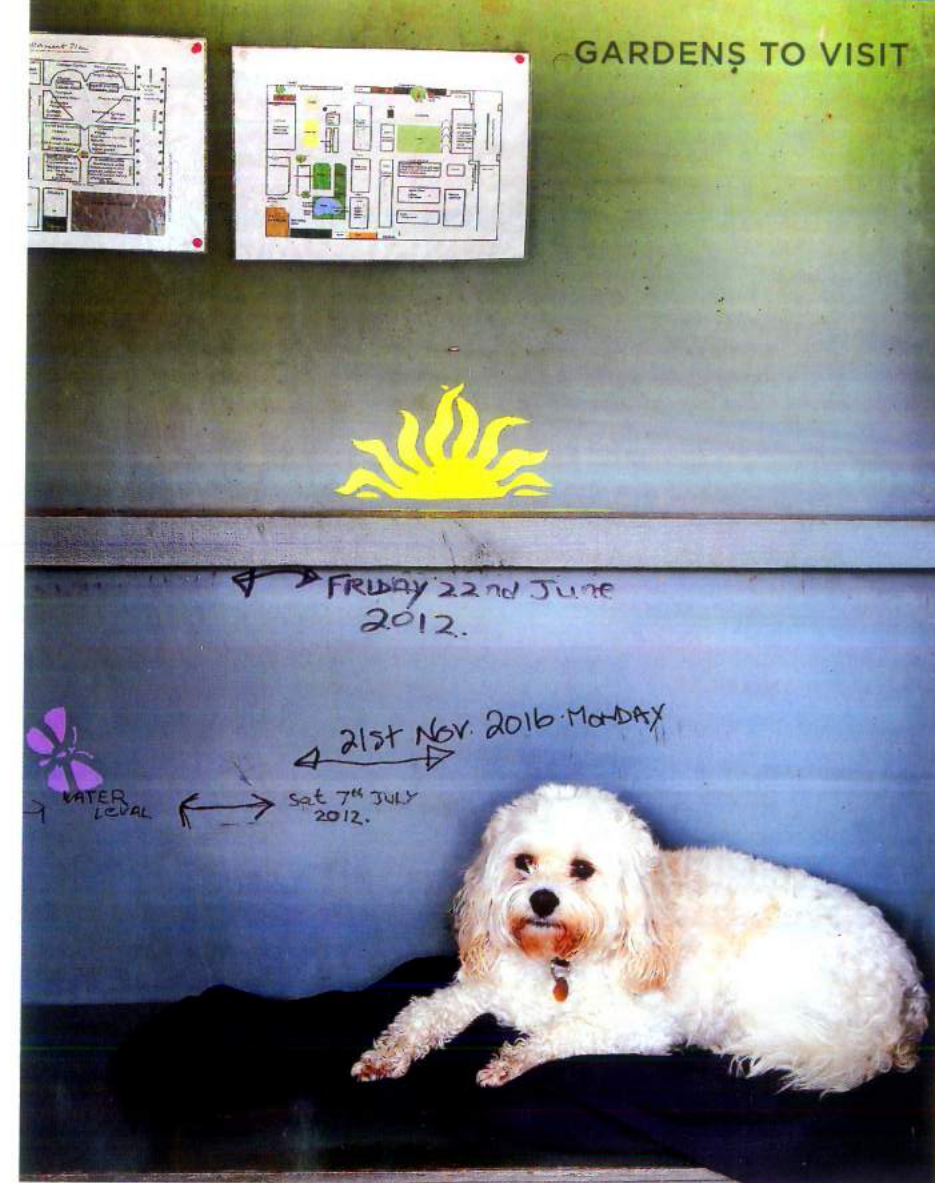
There was certainly no sign of the devastation suffered as I left the shelter and went off to see for myself accompanied by Debbie Cruise, the on-site horticulturalist who works one day a week as well as doing some volunteering. There was so much to see, from the wildlife area including a pond to the unusual vegetables and colourful flowers both for show and cutting. Almost everything is grown from seed which is where the polytunnels and greenhouse come in.

When I remarked on the amount of produce Debbie told me one of the neighbours cooks for the homeless so some of the produce is given to her, while some is sold to help with the desperately needed funds. They do not buy in any of the structures on the site, everything has been grown and made and designed by the service users, this includes the dramatic pergola with climbing plants trained up the posts.

This is sited adjacent to 'Woodland Green Station' where all the construction/joinery takes place. They are also very proud of a straw house which is being built in the traditional way using authentic materials. Looking up as I entered, the ceiling is a sight to behold with its ornate colourful design. It is hoped it will be completed shortly.

Companion planting is used to help ward off pests as the whole plot is organic which also helps by encouraging wildlife. There is a huge variety of vegetables grown and it is hard to believe they are grown from seed, whether massive cabbages or small lettuces. Many of the flowers are traditional cottage garden plants

**'We wept. The River Roach had broken its banks and everything was destroyed... but gardeners are a hardy breed and everyone pulled their finger out and we have what you can see today'**



Above: The shed showing the level of flooding in the past

Below: Some of the cabbages are whoppers

making a colourful display. Debbie pauses, bends down and gently cups a corncockle bloom. 'How beautiful is that?' she says. There is also a herb garden which is planted in a heart shape, as well as a lawn and BBQ area.

Wildlife is well catered for as there is a pond, insect hotel and a home for hedgehogs, with plenty of soft fruit there is plenty for both humans and birds. Wildflowers, which are difficult to grow can be found in abundance. Although they have fruit trees there are plans to create an orchard and a walkway has already been put in to lead the way.

One long standing member died and 'Irene's Garden' is an area named after her. She came until a month before she died and has been sorely missed. It is no doubt the benefits of this project gives individuals a purpose and make them feel wanted.

There is certainly a lesson to be learnt here. Next time you pop down to the supermarket, just think – you could be growing the potatoes, vegetable, salad and fruit you have just put in your trolley. ♦

\* The Growth Project will open as part of the National Garden Scheme on August 11. The NBGS will soon be publishing its book of gardens to visit in 2018. Go to [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk) to find out more.