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THE MAGAZINE OF MILITARY HOUSING, LODGING & LIFESTYLES

DEFENSE COMMUNITIES

MAY/JUNE... 2009

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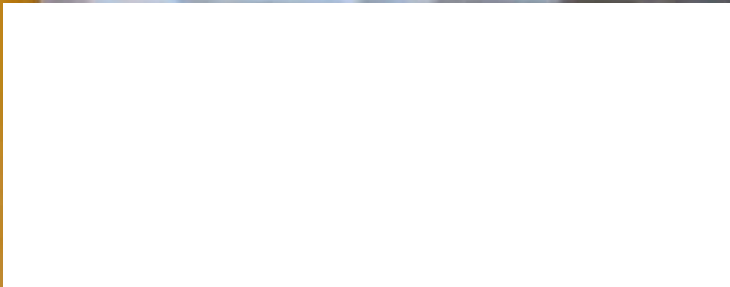
**Emergency
planning tips**
Page 22

**Virtual building
designs**
Page XX



Making the Outdoors Great

**How playgrounds and
natural settings help
support military families**





How Outdoor Spaces Help Heal

Military service members and families can benefit from natural settings.

By Rebecca Beach

Recovery is an important concept to military service members in times of war. Recovery can refer to a number of challenges, including wounds or disabilities, post-traumatic stress syndrome, trauma associated with deployments, the stresses of relocation, and much more.

The healing benefits from being outside, close to nature, and involved with others make nature the ideal place for recovery. Nancy Gabriel, Program Director at the Sustainability Institute in Hartland, Vermont, says, "Many studies produce strong evidence that even three to five minutes of contact with nature can significantly reduce stress and have a complex impact on emotions, reducing anger and fear, and increasing pleasant feelings."

Natural connections

Historically, parks, gardens, wilderness, rivers, creeks, streams, nature trails, camping, fishing, and just being outside in the sunshine and fresh air have kept people healthy, sane, productive, and connected. In many communities across America, including military communities, there sometimes is no compelling reason for families to be outside or in contact with nature. Often, the outdoor

environment is flat and sterile as natural landscape and wild places no longer exist out the back door. More likely, what is outdoors is either a small plot of grass or possibly a ballpark or even a playground with outdated equipment. In general, the outdoors is usually lacking in interest, and people find more reasons to be inside working at their computers, watching TV, or doing family chores.

However, if being outside is one of the best places for restoration of the human spirit, then there is a compelling need for outside spaces that draw people to them. But what makes an outdoor space more appealing than the TV? To begin with, outdoor spaces must have an infrastructure that supports people of all abilities and ages. Just having a playground, even a beautiful new one, without accessibility for all children or a bench for Mom or Dad to rest on or engage with another adult is not compelling enough to keep parents and kids coming back often. A flat ballpark with a fence is sufficient for the kids during the game, but what is there to keep anyone interested after the game is over?

People need outdoor environments that provide sheltered spaces for family picnics, sunny benches for resting or observing active children on safe play sets, quiet spaces for those needing some solitude, vegetable gardens to raise





nutritious food, and flower and herb gardens for attracting birds and butterflies. Outdoor places equipped with accessible paths that wind throughout create a network of dynamic interactive communal spaces for walkers, joggers, infants in strollers, bicycles, tricycles, and wheelchairs. Places that are full of rich sensory sights, smells, and sounds full of life—keep people coming back and spending more of their life outside reconnecting with people and nature.

Repurposing land

Reclaimed “wasted areas” on the perimeters of ballparks, playgrounds, or pockets of unused land near residential areas can be developed into communal gardens. This is an efficient use of land, water, and community resources and yet another way of bringing residents together. The therapeutic value of people seeing life spring from seeds and growing from just adding water and sunshine is a miracle in itself. There is an undeniable joy in eating or sharing a tomato you have grown yourself. Small children and even adults can learn the wonder of growing things and the biology

Outdoor spaces must have an infrastructure that supports people of all abilities and ages to keep parents and kids coming back often.

and interdependence of plants, soil, insects, birds, and bees. But even the communal garden needs infrastructure. Raised beds with retaining walls; arbors; gazebos; shade and shelter from the heat; harvest tables; and benches and tables provide places for people to not only grow their food but share recipes and share life.

A community garden also encourages the community to act responsibly with its resources. Studies show that our food travels an average of 1,500 miles from farm to table, according to the Revive the Victory Garden web site. The process of planting, fertilizing, processing, packaging, and transporting our food uses a great deal of energy and contributes to global warming. Organic gardening research shows a much higher content of nutrients in food grown

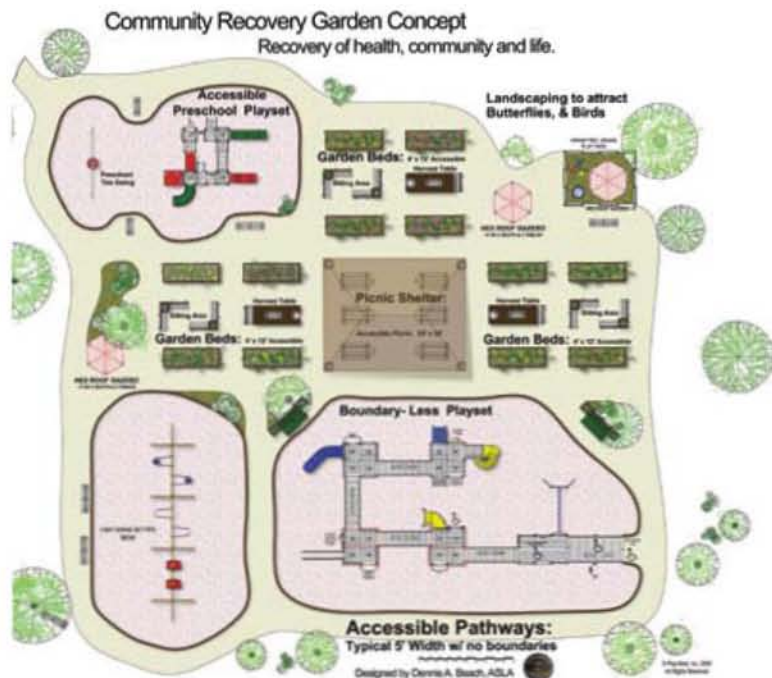
with composted and enriched soils. Individuals in the community with experience in gardening, food preparation, and storage can share their skills and develop meaningful relationships at the same time. Community gardens can stretch family budgets in tight economic times. Sharing extra produce with other families creates a giving community based on caring for each other’s needs.

Human interaction

Recovery often relies heavily on human interaction. In the past, families, towns, or villages that worked together on farms or large gardens created their own sense of belonging to each other, caring for each other's children, protecting each other's property, and resources, and being there when disaster struck—much like today's military families.

When outdoor opportunities exist nearby for people to play and work together and even produce something out of just soil, seeds, and water, families might begin life outdoors once again. Recovery from a multitude of difficult situations—illness, economic challenges, a lost loved one, or just loneliness—can begin in life-giving outdoor spaces. The restoring of American communities to a better condition begins with recognizing the value of creating an infrastructure that invites people of all ages and abilities to come outside and get connected to each other and benefit from the healing properties of nature. ■

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Graphic concept design of a Community Recovery Garden by Dennis Beach, ASLA.