



Gayle Souter-Brown (l.) is a landscape designer and entrepreneur who has researched the many ways that green spaces (r.) can improve our health and quality of life, no matter where we live. Photos courtesy of the author.

## British Author Offers Universal Design for Outdoor Spaces

BY SABRINA AUTRY

Overwhelming evidence points to the link between health and the amount of time spent outside, according to Gayle Souter-Brown, author of “Landscape and Urban Design for Health and Well-Being: Using Healing, Sensory and Therapeutic Gardens.”

Green spaces are accessible, free, bio-diverse areas that are planted for the benefit of people, animals and the environment. They can come in the form of vines growing alongside a building or trees in a verge along an intersection. Green spaces can be sited almost anywhere from rooftops, apartment balconies, parks or a tiny backyard.

Souter-Brown said that many lessons can be learned from nature, and one of them is nature’s ability to aid in recovery from illnesses and disease.

“Lifestyle-related health conditions are cost effectively prevented and mitigated through effective green space design,” said Souter-Brown. “Coronary artery disease, diabetes, obesity, depression and anxiety are all expensive to treat and their social cost on the individual, their family, and [the] wider community is huge.”

The health implications of adding green spaces can even extend to improving educational goals for coming generations. Souter-Brown argues that it is important for children to have time to experience nature with their body’s senses. She explained that part of the developmental process for children is interacting with the world around them and creating connections to get a better sense of themselves.

Hand-eye coordination, problem solving, reading, writing and balance can be shaped by time spent

in green spaces where children are able to swing, jump, crawl and create a connection with the plants and animals around them.

Adults are also in need of nature connections to sustain their well-being. There are many generations today that have no access to parks or simple green space areas said Souter-Brown. This means that countless adults are missing out on potential health-giving benefits.

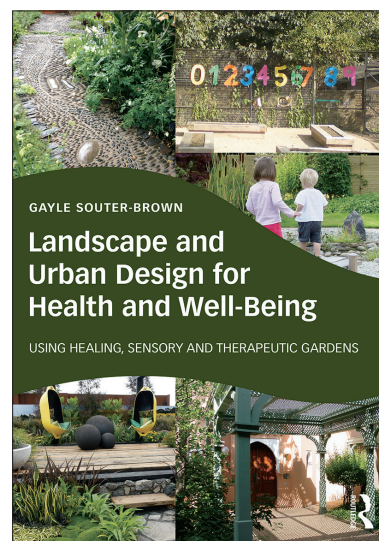
Creating green spaces to help more people utilize these health benefits is an easier feat than most people realize.

There are no special limitations for creating a green space and people don’t have to dig deep in their pockets to create one, she said. Her design team was able to create a garden in a 10-square-meter space by building vertically instead of horizontally.

The key to green spaces is sustainability.

“A healthy green space development needs no more input than an annual application of composted mulch to retain soil fertility and soil moisture levels,” the author said. “What is important is that designers create a space designed to fulfill its widest possible, cost-effective, health-giving potential.”

Each geographic area poses its own problems and opportunities said Souter-Brown, who has traveled with her husband across most of the world’s climate zones.



In New Mexico, she suggests using designs from walled Islamic gardens for a sensory-rich experience in the desert climate of the state and to conserve water use. Adding appropriately designed green spaces in New Mexico could improve health and species biodiversity.

Souter-Brown’s life experiences with disability paved the way for her career in green space design.

Her mother fostered five-year-old Gayle’s “love affair” with the environment and gardens by giving her seeds and space to plant them; by age seven, she had begun experimenting with design. By 15, issues over mental health grabbed

her interest, but it wasn’t until 10 years later, when she broke her back while riding a horse, that she delved into accessible and universal design research.

“Good things do come from bad and it has been a privilege to meet less able and active people and to share personal stories,” said Souter-Brown.

Now, 30 years later, she continues to educate people on the health benefits of green space design and leads two research design practices in New Zealand and the U.K. Across the world, people are learning to view green spaces as a fundamental need.

*Sabrina Autry is an intern for ABQ Free Press.*