

Care Farming Without Farms: The Potential for Therapeutic Farms in Singapore

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Care Farming and Singapore

Mr. Lim is retired. He lives alone in a small public housing flat (Housing Development Board or HDB flat) where he moved a couple of years ago after retiring from his job. In the morning, he wakes up and after breakfast he goes outside of his building to join his friends and a few neighbors in weeding and watering herbs and vegetables. He does not have any gardening experience but there is an experienced farmer at hand to advise and organize work at this little community farm. During work, Mr. Lim discusses the latest news and gossip, and shares a laugh or two with his fellow gardeners. Later in the morning, people from the estate come by to buy herbs and veggies for today's meals. As the heat becomes oppressive, visitors are welcome as source of distraction. Work is gradually finished and the sound of watering cans is replaced by friendly chit-chat and laughter.

Afterwards, visitors leave with fresh greens, as well as the latest news, ready to cook in a few minutes. As lunchtime approaches, gardeners decide on today's dish, based on the produce that is ready to be harvested. Appropriate crops are picked and all the gardeners move to a nearby activity centre where Mr. Lim joins the cooking group and helps with chopping up vegetables, while others sink in chairs and sofas to read newspapers and rest after a morning of gardening. When the food is ready, all the gardeners share the meal, enjoying every bite, knowing they are eating the literal fruits of their labor.

At the end of the day, Mr. Lim goes to bed pleasantly tired, but with his head buzzing with echoes of today's conversations and looking forward to starting again tomorrow.

Mr. Lim's story may not reflect a typical lifestyle for seniors in Singapore, but in a number of Western countries, many retirees enjoy the opportunity to spend their day in a similar way. In the past two decades, the phenomenon of care farming, or farming for health, has grown rapidly in a number of European countries, such as the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Norway, and Belgium. With its growing popularity, importance,

and formal acknowledgement by local authorities and health care providers, the number of care farms has grown accordingly, reaching well over 700 facilities in the Netherlands alone.

What is Care Farming?

So what exactly is care farming? Care farming is defined as "the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health, through normal farming activity" (Hine et al. 2008, p.6). Care farms offer informal and non-institutionalized forms of care that are especially appropriate for clients and patients with specific health problems (such as mental illnesses, addictions, or intellectual disabilities), social problems (problem youth, long-term unemployed), older persons, and children (Hassink et al. 2012).

There are a number of studies that have examined the health benefits of care farm practices on human health and wellbeing (Hine et al. 2008; Elings and Hassink 2008; de Bruin et al. 2009). Bragg et al. (2014) summarized the positive effects of care farming on human health as an increase in social inclusion; social and work skills; empowerment; social functioning; coping ability; social rehabilitation; cognitive functioning and wellbeing; improvements in self-esteem and mood, and reduction in depression and anxiety related symptoms.

Typically, care farms have started as a result of a bottom-up process initiated by farmers, with the main motives of personal interest, enriching one's own life with new activities, and a need for extra income (Hassink et al. 2006). As care farms are typically established at existing working farms, they are mostly located in the countryside. However, as more and more people live in urban areas, the rural location of care farms might make this kind of activity inaccessible for some urban dwellers, particularly those with reduced mobility or access to reliable transportation. As a result, the phenomenon has started to slowly move to urban areas as well.



Care Farming in Singapore

Singapore is a pioneer when it comes to horticulture-based therapeutic activities and their formal recognition. We find gardens with therapeutic elements in public parks, hospitals, schools, and universities, as well as community gardens in public housing (HDB) estates. Would it make sense to try to create care farms in addition to these facilities?

First, we need to clarify what makes care farming different from other types of horticulture-based therapies. There are three main features that distinguish a care farm from other types of therapeutic gardens:

- The organization of the facility with the strong authority of a farmer (=leader) who manages and, in cooperation with an occupational therapist, organizes work on a care farm;
- Strong emphasis on both therapy and productivity with the aim to produce more than what the participants need, so that excess produce can be sold or donated;
- The environment of a farm, which also includes areas for socializing, cooking, and eating, and which requires regular maintenance work that is crucial to keep the facility going.

As we can see, care farming offers therapeutic activities in a less 'therapeutic' and more 'real-life' or productive way which might be an interesting

alternative for some. Indeed, with virtually no rural areas and a limited number of traditional farms, it would be impractical to try to precisely replicate the Western model of care farming. However, with the lack of traditional farms, how could such facilities be effectively managed and regulated? Could city planning authorities assume the role as initiators of care farming?

Singapore is currently one of the most rapidly ageing societies in the world. Undeniably, the government of Singapore, as well as a large number of non-governmental organizations, is well aware of this issue and already supports and organizes a range of projects that aim to improve the quality of life for older people. Care farms at HDB estates for older residents could thus join the portfolio of these senior-oriented programs. Indeed, a number of community gardens already exist in HDB estates. Care farms operate in a different way. Firstly, activities at care farms would be planned and organized in cooperation with horticultural or occupational therapists to incorporate the needs and abilities of older people. Thus, the health and wellbeing benefits of care farms would be amplified as compared to typical community gardens. Also, with an experienced gardener in the role of a farmer, a care farm would potentially be more productive than a community garden, with surplus produce that could be donated or sold. Hence, the project could be partially self-financed.

1. Two participants removing brass-wire from old domestic appliances Photo Credit: Roy Hendriks



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Indeed, with a lack of existing farms, it would be quixotic to try to build actual farms from scratch. However, given the existing network of community-level facilities, such as senior activity centres, an idea would be for care farms to be integrated in this network and share some of their facilities, as mentioned in the opening story. The care farming concept would thus be predominantly adopted through its organization and management practices, and less of the authentic farm-like environment.

The author of this article has started conducting a case study in Singapore on the feasibility of care farming for seniors in HDB estates. In the initial study, 30 older residents of a HDB estate were interviewed. Most of the interviewees, regardless of their gardening experiences, expressed keen interest in participating in care farming-style activities. A particular finding from the discussions was the reassuring role of a farmer as a leader and mentor. Apparently, the presence of a person with gardening knowledge and experience encourages people to participate, even those without any previous gardening experience. Also, the idea of performing gardening and other activities, such as cooking, in a group setting was unanimously viewed as positive. A few participants even expressed that they would not be interested unless it was in a group.

On the other hand, not all participants agreed with the idea that part of the produce would be sold to help finance the project. While the idea was mostly understood in principle, a few participants expressed concern that such produce should be donated rather than sold. At the same time, it seemed that participants would be pleased to see that others from the community could use their produce in a productive manner. This conforms with experiences from Europe where enhanced self-esteem and confidence, together with a strong

community feel, are some of the main outcomes of care farming.

Overall, initial results seem to highlight that interest in urban care farming is strong among the older HDB residents in Singapore. An important question will be whether it is possible to design a sustainable organizational system to make this idea work.

Care Farming in the Netherlands

An inventory in the Netherlands has identified different types of nature based activities for people with dementia in cities. Programs for people with dementia have been established on city farms, community gardens and gardens of health care organizations. Initiatives are taken by health care professionals, farmers and entrepreneurial citizens.

Hoeve Klein Mariendaal

An interesting example of a care farm providing care services to a diversity of participants is Hoeve Klein Mariendaal in the city of Arnhem in the Netherlands. It is located on an area of 2.5 hectares and consists of arable land, grassland and a restaurant/tea garden. It is a popular place not only for people who need support in their life, but also for urban citizens who enjoy a walk to the farm, or companies that use the farm for meetings or business lunches. This city farm provides day activities to adults with mental problems, intellectual disabilities, brain damage, and people with dementia living at home. During the weekends, children with autism living at home can participate in a farm program.

All care services are paid by the municipality. The participants can choose from a variety of activities. Working in the garden or the field growing vegetables, flowers and herbs; taking care of farm animals like cows, donkeys, chicken, sheep, guinea-pigs and rabbits, working in the kitchen of the restaurant and tea garden, or serving



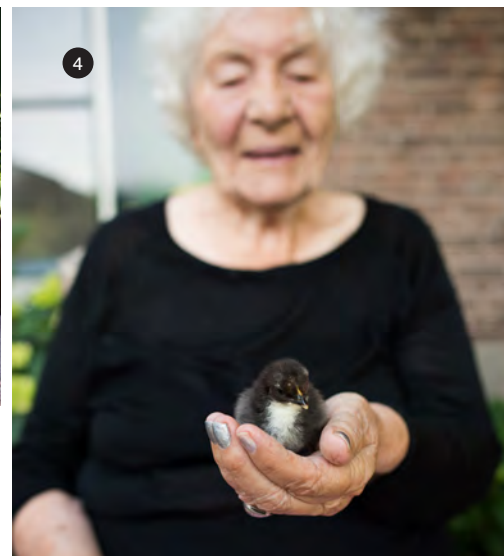
drinks and lunches to customers.

In addition, participants can take part in creative activities like painting and making music and physical activities like walking or sport activities. Participants are guided by a team of professionals with training in agriculture and care-giving as well as a considerable number of volunteers. For adults, the objectives of the care farm are to provide participants useful day activities, a sense of empowerment and to improve their working skills. For children, major objectives are to unburden the parents and provide an attractive program where children are stimulated to play with each other and have positive experiences. For people with dementia, we aim to relieve the burden of their partners and to activate people by offering diverse activities.

During interviews with many participants, they indicated that they appreciate the personal relationship with the farmer and the farmers' family, the focus on possibilities instead of their limitations, being part of a social community, being outside in a natural environment and taking part in useful and diverse activities. Most participants mention the specific value of farm animals. Animals can help them build connections with people, provide comfort, and a welcoming atmosphere, as well as useful and challenging types of work and activities.


A Day on the Farm for People with Dementia

A group of seven people with dementia, age between 60 and 85 is guided by Lieke Camerik, a creative therapist. She is supported by two volunteers. The participants arrive around 9.30am. The day starts with coffee and tea and chatting. Everyone can choose what they like to do: some like to work in the garden, some like to do painting or play jeu de boules. Two men are particularly fond of removing brass-wire from old domestic appliances. They collect the brass-wire and sell it. Some of the women have adopted a raised bed for growing herbs and flowers. Some of the participants go for a walk for 45 minutes. They are accompanied by one of the volunteers. At 11.00am, it is coffee time.



At noon the participants who are interested in preparing lunch together, gathered vegetables from the field. Some of the participants feed the remains to the chickens. There is a joint lunch including homemade soup and salad in the restaurant of the farm. A common lunch is very important, as research has shown that people with dementia eat and drink better when they are on the care farm in comparison to conventional day care facilities. After lunchtime, some of the participants go home and others stay at the farm and join a mixed group of people with dementia and people with mental problems and brain damage. The mingling of participants with different conditions works very well for most.

In the afternoon, people can choose to continue with the same kind of activities or they can choose to do something else. After having tea around 3.00 pm, it is time to reflect on the day before returning home. Most of the participants use a taxi to come to the farm. A few times a year, the partners are also invited to come to the farm and join us for the annual spring and autumn fair, summer party and Christmas celebration.

The people with dementia, including their partners, prefer day activities on the care farm because they can choose what they like to do, appreciate the personal contact with Lieke and the volunteers and enjoy being part of the group. Most of them also enjoy the interaction with visitors. They especially enjoy the presence of children. For those who found it difficult to ask their partner to go to a day activity centre, care farming was very helpful as the farm does not feel like a traditional day activity centre and that their partners can still do things they are interested in. Some participants with dementia do not even realize that it is a day activity. They express that they do voluntary work on the farm. They experience the farm as a pleasant place where they can still be part of the society. 

3.The café is a popular place for the participants and visitors alike. Photo Credit: Roy Hendriks

4.Our participants say that animals help them build contacts with people too. Photo Credit: Roy Hendriks