

# Tending the Garden: Working Toward Wellness

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSAN LARKIN

The Garden of Eden lives in our cultural imagination, even for readers who no longer remember its biblical roots. A favorite theme for artists and writers, it hovers in our collective consciousness as a longed-for, peaceful place, suspended in mythic time. What has often been excised from this idyllic image is a fact that all gardeners will recognize as they feel their calloused palms and bruised knees – Adam and Eve were placed there not just to enjoy themselves, but to tend the Garden as well. There was work to be done, even there, to nurture that mythical paradise.

When Carole Stone and Abby Eller founded the organization Compos Mentis (Latin for “clear mind”), they chose gardening as the core activity for men and women who needed more time to recover from a major mental illness than a hospital or therapist’s office would allow. They intuitively reached back to this archetypal garden image, even as they looked forward to a more hopeful, healing future.

While gardening shapes the entire day for the entire growing season at Compos Mentis, many other activities are also offered, including yoga, autobiographical writing, poetry reading, and informal discussions. Often invited speakers address topics such as the use of medications or how to identify community resources for financial support, job training and housing. Since Compos Mentis is not a designated treatment program, no

formal psychotherapy takes place at the farm. But important opportunities arise spontaneously for the clients, called “apprentices,” to discuss the effect of illness on their lives while working alongside trained volunteers in the field, or preparing and sharing a meal together. Half of the apprentices from the first season now work as volunteers and contribute to these discussions as well. The organization hopes to develop a model that can be copied by other communities to promote and sustain mental well-being.

Indeed, when it comes to communal efforts to provide meaningful work and care for the mentally ill, gardening has a long history. Willard State Hospital (originally named by its nineteenth century founders “The Willard Asylum for the Insane”) opened in 1869 in Ovid, New York, complete with an active garden that



Luella Barlow, a visiting artist from Scotland, works on the mural she helped apprentices design.

helped feed the residents—as did the gardens in other newly-founded state mental hospitals. But these were residential institutions. By contrast, Compos Mentis, now in its second season, sets a significantly different agenda for itself. Most apprentices are in a recovery phase, participating in Compos Mentis by day and living with their families at night and on weekends. Not infrequently, family members work alongside them in the garden. They seem to sense, as all gardeners do, that taking one’s cues from the rhythm of the sun’s passage across the sky and the turning of the seasons makes us all more human and whole.

Recently, I visited the farm, which is perched on a hillside on the west



Meghan Tauck and Molly Cox-Hite prepare calendula soap.

shore of Cayuga Lake, to meet with program coordinator Shannon Haskins. She was busy with early spring preparations for the program’s May opening. Perhaps it is no accident that the land, located on an abandoned farm that had not been worked for 40 years, needed revival and restoration as much as its workers. This year’s garden had the benefit of tilling and harvesting and being put to bed for the winter after the previous year’s abundant crop.



Scarlet runner beans grow at Compos Mentis. The hoop house and barn are visible in the background.



Apprentices and leaders hoist the frame of a shelter being constructed for baby miniature goats.

So it was no longer as overgrown with weeds and dry from lack of tending as it was a year ago.

Haskins already had a rosy outdoor glow as she greeted me and directed us toward the hoop house (a 45' x 30' plastic-covered structure). Seedlings in trays were already benefiting from watering and wind sheltering: Swiss chard, arugula,

fennel, spinach, and red romaine lettuce had all been started from seeds this spring, and hopeful green leaves poked through the neatly-arrayed trays. Haskins pointed to one “experiment” with pleasure and amusement. Compos Mentis had received a gift of three-year old eggplant seeds last year, so she planted them. Lo and behold, there they were, greening up like the rest!

But gardening is, at best, an unpredictable pastime. Another trial had not fared so well. She pointed to a tray where Brandywine tomato seeds saved from last year’s crop at the farm had been started and were doing well—until an unexpected frost came along and killed all but one hardy plant. “I guess we’ll have to buy transplants to replace them,” she said and moved on to the rosemary, parsley, stevia and Italian basil that had germinated before the previous week’s cooler weather, and were now thriving. There were several other “experiments” that she pointed out to me before we left the hoop house. The back half had been tilled and the rich brown soil would now shelter tomatoes and other heat-loving crops to extend the season. The other

“experiment” was an unlikely gift from Mother Nature. A potted fig tree had sat dormant in a cinder-block garage over the winter. Haskins noticed a few buds when she came to inspect the farm this spring, so she moved it into the hoop house and there it was, leafing out and very much alive. Figs in Ithaca!

We moved on through a swinging gate into the half-acre garden. The rows had been neatly laid out last year and most had been seeded with rye grass as a winter cover crop. This had recently been plowed into the ground in preparation for the new vegetable crop. But the gain of extra nutrients from the winter crop was not an unmixed blessing. Haskins pointed to rye grass leaves that poked tenaciously through the soil. These would now morph from nutrients to weeds, adding to the apprentices’ already full load of gardening chores.

There were rows of garlic with sturdy green 14-inch tall shoots that had been planted last fall—four different varieties to harvest in mid-summer, including “soft neck” for braiding. Red Bergermaster, Copra, and Walla Walla onion transplants were also poking through, full of life. The paths between the rows, still covered with hay, all converged at the center, where a mound of strawberry plants with serrated leaves sat like kings of the hill, promising to yield their fruit. This was the first season they would bear.

Just in case the abundance to come was not yet sufficient, Haskins offered to show me the flower garden. In a separate area outside the gate, she pointed to a smaller plot where pink cosmos, purple and white alyssums, yellow and orange daffodils, purple Russian sages, red columbines, silver artemesias, orange butterfly weeds,



Sunflowers bloom in the Compos Mentis garden; summer, 2007



Shannon Haskins and program assistant Kate Lamarre help the first baby goat settle in.

