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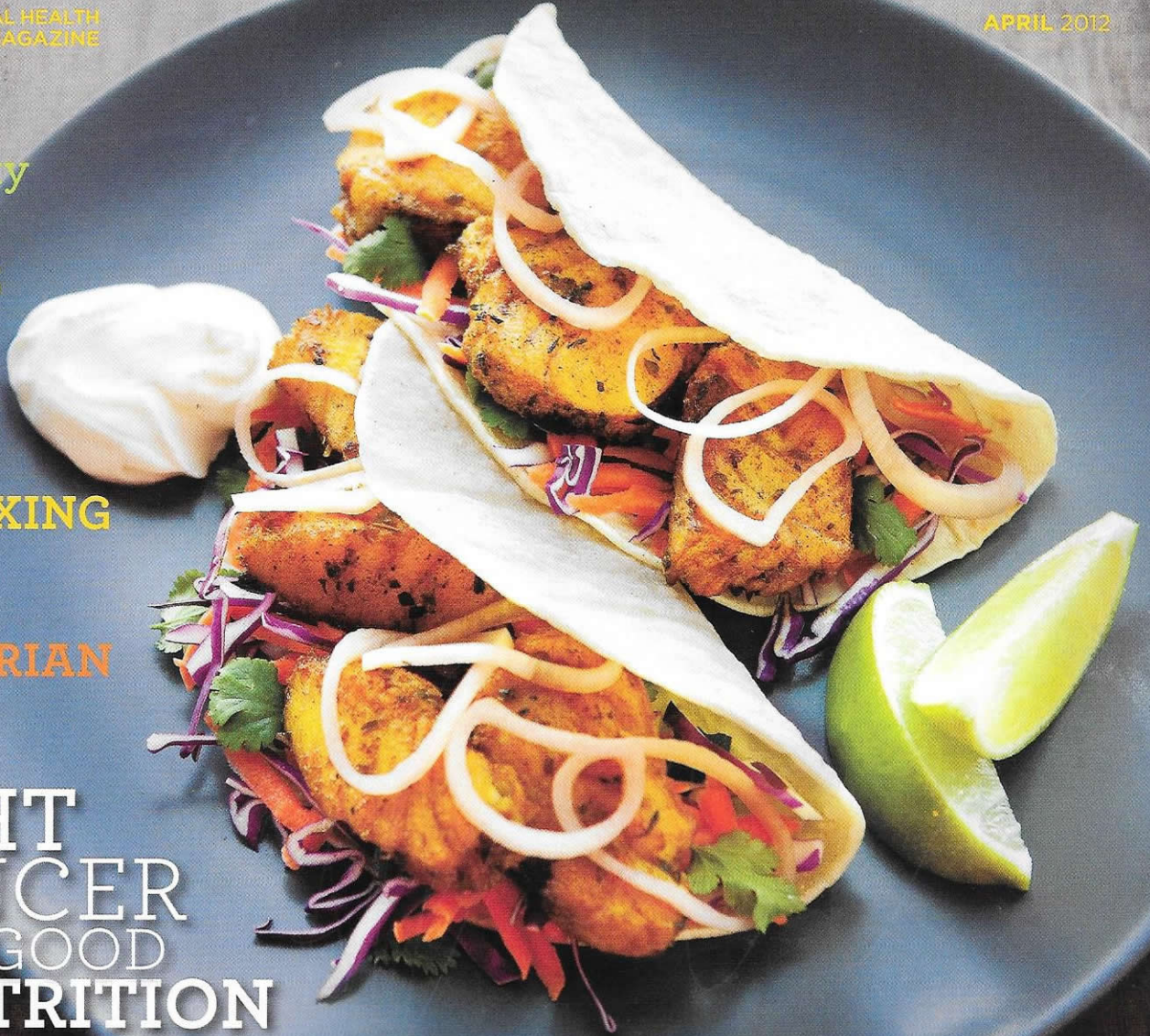
APRIL 2012

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zen gardens

A healing place for cancer patients

| Janet Nicol

Observe the curving lines of raked gravel, the simple and precise arrangement of rocks, and the sound of a waterfall in a Zen garden. Breathe deeply and let go of worries. Meditation in a Zen garden will clear the clutter from your mind and nourish the spirit. >

Cancer patients are often encouraged to meditate as a way to reduce stress and strengthen the mind-body connection. Meditating in a Zen garden as a complementary therapy enhances this experience.

The uniquely calming oasis invites awareness of an environment beyond the self and helps patients regain a sense of perspective and control. Just being “present” provides an opportunity to embrace the healing impact of nature.

TRANQUILITY

Buddhist monks in Kyoto, the garden city of Japan, have welcomed visitors over the last five centuries to their Zen garden at the Ryoanji Temple. Monks sit on benches to contemplate the carefully arranged vegetation, rocks, and water elements. Beds of gravel are raked in patterns suggesting rippling water, symbolizing the sea.

Japanese gardens are also located across Canada (see sidebar on page 96). The arrangement, colours, and content of the garden evoke tranquility. The garden design is minimalist. As well, the palette of garden colours is deliberately limited so visitors’ senses are soothed, not overstimulated. Researchers note Zen gardens instill a sense of harmony and foundation among visitors.

MINDFULNESS

Meditation in a Zen garden can simply mean relaxing quietly. Practising mindful meditation may be even more beneficial. Of all the meditation methods available, Australian researcher Ainslie Meares found cultivating emptiness—the “absence of discriminative thought”—to be the most powerful type of meditation for healing. Meares suggests clearing the mind is, in fact, more powerful than thought-filled meditation such as positive thinking or guided imagery.

The BC Cancer Clinic offers an introduction to mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) meditation and basic yoga in an eight-week program offered throughout the year. Participants are asked to commit to a daily practice of approximately 45 minutes for optimal benefit. This practice has helped cancer patients to lower pain levels, reduce anxiety, and increase their sense of well-being.

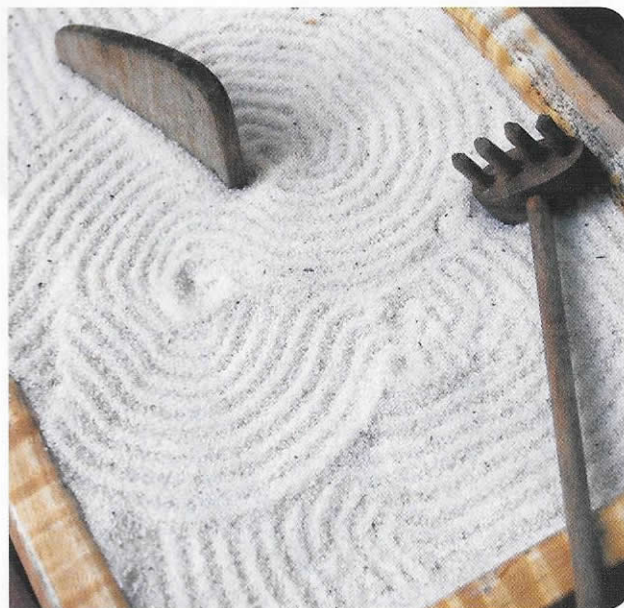
Therapeutic healing gardens, including Zen gardens, are becoming more accessible to cancer patients as researchers continue to study their positive impact. Some gardens also provide horticultural therapy as a



Create a Zen garden

Do-it-yourself gardening books offer people an opportunity to create a Zen garden in their own backyard or on an apartment balcony.

If space is a consideration, a tabletop Zen garden consisting of a tray containing sand and stones can replicate a Japanese garden inside your home. These are available at select garden shops.

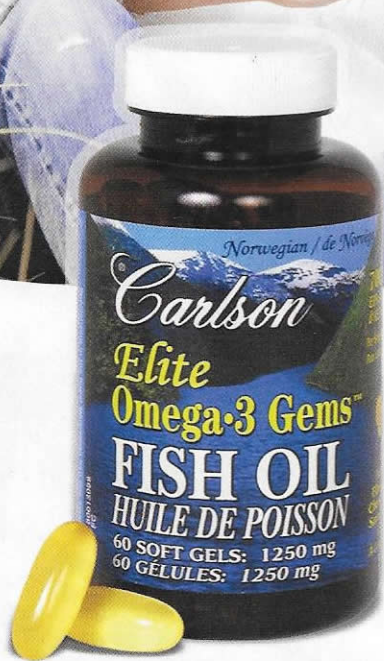
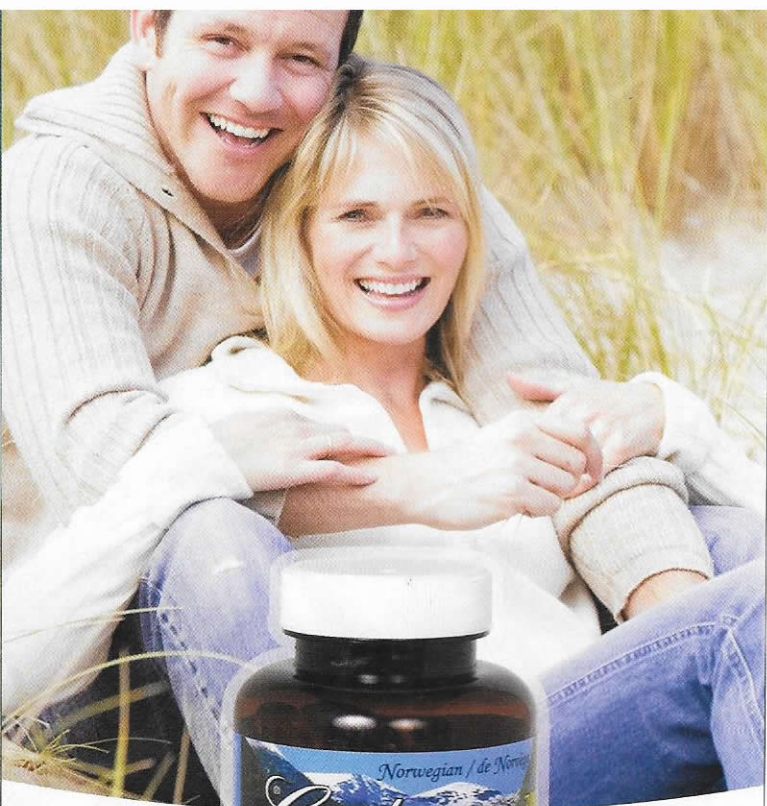


component of their stress-reduction therapies for clients diagnosed with cancer.

STRESS REDUCTION

Japanese gardens offer unique healing properties to vulnerable populations, according to a study conducted by Rutgers University. Researchers reported that patients who sit in these gardens experience reduced stress and enhanced well-being.

Some treatment facilities have designed Zen gardens with the needs of cancer patients in mind. Features include pathways that are symbolic of the cancer journey, with stepping stones and large boulders resembling challenges patients and their families may face along the way. ▷



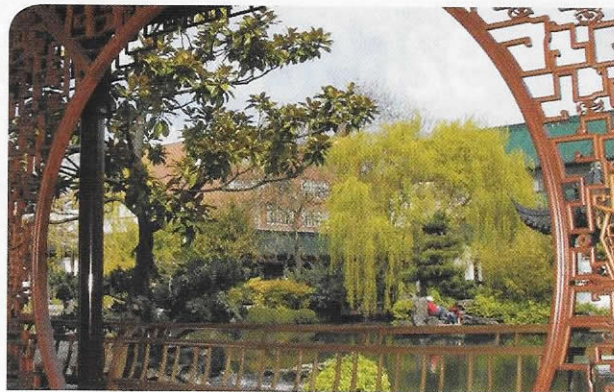
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Visit a Zen garden

Japanese Garden and Pavilion, Montreal Botanical Garden, Montreal, Quebec

Its emerald-green stones, mined in Quebec, represent islands within the dry landscape.

www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en/japonais/japonais.htm

Zen Garden, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec

Built on the museum's rooftop in 1995, its theme is *Wakei No Niwa*, which means to know and respect Canadian and Japanese cultures.

civilization.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/cmhc/architecture/tour17e.shtml

The Zen Garden, Artist's Garden #9, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Ontario

Originally designed as a two-month exhibit, it honours the physical centre of Buddhist cosmology found at the sacred site of Mt. Kailas in western Tibet.

talesoftheearth.com/pages08/gdn_zen.html

The David G. Porter Memorial Japanese Garden, Guelph University, Guelph, Ontario

Built in 1995 and dedicated to the late Dr. Porter, a professor at the university who became interested in dry landscape gardens on a trip to Japan in 1993.

uoguelph.ca/arboretum/collectionsandresearch/gardens-japanese.shtml

Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden, Lethbridge, Alberta

The teahouse, bell tower, *azumaya* shelter, gates, and bridges were built with yellow cypress wood by Japanese artisans and then shipped to Lethbridge.

nikkayuko.com

Nitobe Memorial Garden, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC

Located at the edge of the UBC campus, it is considered one of the top five Japanese gardens outside Japan and features a rare authentic tea garden with a ceremonial tea house.

botanicalgarden.ubc.ca/nitobe

“This practice has helped cancer patients lower pain levels, reduce anxiety, and increase their sense of well-being.”

HEALING

A cancer treatment centre at a community hospital in Oregon has designed an innovative garden setting. Patients receive treatment while sitting in ergonomic chairs, looking out through floor-to-ceiling windows at a Japanese garden containing waterfalls and a pond filled with koi. Japanese gardens emphasize natural patterns and human health, making them well suited for relaxation therapy and holistic cancer treatment.

Karen Wallace, a Vancouver Island art therapist, encourages her clients to create their own Zen garden. “The act of raking motion is meant to have a calming and centring effect on the person raking,” she explains. “Playing with the patterns can be a way to open or close a therapy session.”

CONTEMPLATION

Master gardener Yoshihiro Kawasaki was trained in Kyoto and has a landscaping business in Vancouver called Zen Gardens. “Zen gardens have a beautiful aesthetic,” Kawasaki says in an interview with *alive*, “and they are also contemplative.”

Several clients have requested Zen gardens after raising children, says Dorothy Kennedy, Kawasaki’s wife and business partner. “They want to replace the basketball court with a peaceful garden. But our clients could be from any age group.”

“Beginning my day by walking through an orderly, structured garden is the perfect antidote to the random chaos of everyday life,” says homeowner Michele Davidson, whose garden was created by Kawasaki.

“I have come to see the landscape of my Zen garden as a metaphor for the emotional landscape of my life,” she says, “with its pathways, hints of the hidden, hard surfaces and soft surfaces, greenery, blossoms, and shadows.”

Kawasaki adds, “These gardens have a calming effect, a healing power.” **a**

Janet Nicol is a freelance writer and teacher. She has a long-time appreciation of all things Zen—meditation and gardens.

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