

heroes: greenfingers

The enchanting new  
Greenfingers woodland  
walk at Chestnut Tree  
House children's hospice  
in West Sussex.

# *Magical* SPACES

**Matthew Wilson** describes the work of Greenfingers, the charity  
that creates sensory gardens for children's hospices ►

PHOTOGRAPHS JOHN CAMPBELL





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

An owl sculpture carved from a tree trunk in front of a hanging mobile that creates sounds in the breeze; signposts in Makaton (a special sign language for those with difficulty communicating through speech) indicate the sorts of critters the Chestnut Tree House kids can expect to see on the walk; nest boxes are dotted around; lengths of coloured cloth hang from the trees; a cheerful snail can be spotted off the path; bug 'hotels' appear all over in different shapes and sizes; the viewing platform for the pond has a barrier of chopped timber poles; some of the trees have 'fairy doors' for woodland folk.





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I have always believed that gardens are much more than the sum of their parts. They can be great havens for wildlife, and places to appreciate space, colour and form, connect with the weather (good, bad and indifferent), dream dreams, dig holes and empty our minds. I've always felt that gardens can change lives.

Just over three years ago, I became the volunteer chairman of Greenfingers, a small charity based in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. Established 15 years ago by the gardening journalist Richard Jackson and a group of like-minded people from the horticultural industry, the charity creates magical outdoor spaces for children's hospices. We design them, raise the funds, and project-manage their creation. Greenfingers has just a handful of part-time employees, relying on our volunteers - many of whom have been involved for years - to help support the work of the charity. Eighteen months ago, we launched our Rosy Cheeks Appeal to raise £750,000 to build our next 10 gardens. We're just about halfway through the appeal, and have just opened our 43rd garden.

Children's hospices receive no central government funding, so every penny has



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to be fundraised, and the priority for that money is, of course, the provision of care for the children and families who use the hospice. It often means there is little or nothing left for the outdoor spaces.

I had no real appreciation of what happens within the children's hospice movement until I got involved; my only

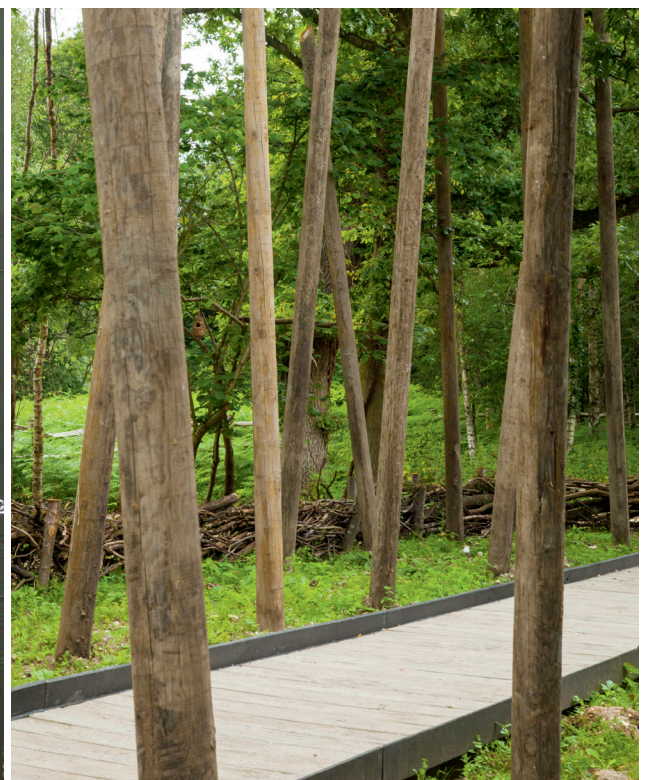
knowledge came through the end-of-life care given to a friend in an adult hospice. Where children's hospices differ - quite radically - is that they provide ongoing respite care and support to children whose illnesses often mean they will live for many years. When we opened our garden at Donna Louise Hospice near Stoke, I met a 'child' who had been going to the hospice for 20 years. This results in a significant point of difference; children's hospices are more about living than they are about dying. It also makes the outdoor space even more important.

Instead of being something nice to look at through a window from a bed, these are active and interactive spaces where children can play, learn, have fun with siblings or simply relax with their families away from medical paraphernalia. On occasion, they provide a peaceful place for a family to be with their child when he or

she dies. At their most basic, they are just 'normal spaces' for kids and families for whom life is anything but 'normal'.

One of ideas I was keen to develop at Greenfingers was the introduction of an expert panel made up of designers and leading horticulturists, to help ensure our gardens are designed and made to ►

**TOP** A bent oak tunnel festooned with branches straddles the path, offering a portal to the next section of the walk. **BELOW LEFT** The blackboards offer fun peek-a-boo holes and a great place to mark up sightings of interesting wildlife. **BELOW RIGHT** Telegraph poles create a valley of 'trunks'. Set tilted at different angles, they offer some vertical drama close to the path.





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the highest standard. Our most recently completed garden, at Chestnut Tree House in West Sussex, is the first to be delivered with input from the group, and one member in particular - leading garden designer Ann-Marie Powell.

With the project located close to her home, Ann-Marie was keen to help, and before too long had offered to design the whole garden; it's hard not to let Greenfingers get under your skin.

The hospice had been given an area of wet woodland adjacent to its main building, and wanted to create a woodland walk through it, and provide a suitable setting for a fun, useable, interactive garden. The presence of standing water, boggy ground, tree roots and level changes would have made this a tricky challenge regardless, but for a hospice garden to work it must be wheelchair accessible, safe to use - no trip hazards, for example - and ideally suitable for year-round use. Built by local landscape company Garden House Design, Ann-Marie's design is based around a looping pathway made from composite decking board - a very hard-wearing type of plastic made with recycled materials, and in this case given a weathered, slightly bleached look. The



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woodland walk is accessed through one of several moon gates adorned with gnarled bony tree limbs. These gates encircle the pathway, and add to the magical sense of entering a mysterious otherworldly place.

Once inside, the path leads to a picnic area comprising a series of circular

lawns, where the kids can feel the grass under their feet. A pre-existing pool has been opened up to create a good-sized pond, with a viewing platform where the children can observe the water wildlife. There is also a bug zone with mini-beast and bug 'hotels', and nest boxes. Metal and wooden moon gates are repeated along the paths, and drama is offered by a stick walk, made using tall telegraph poles to skew the sense of scale. Using different materials and playing with size and scale all help to make the space more engaging for children with sensory limitations. One of the most popular features is the lengths of coloured flowing sailcloth that hang from one of the trees. The children love the sensation of them brushing against their faces as they pass.

Gardens really do have the capacity to lift our spirits, invigorate the soul and make a real difference to how we feel, regardless of whatever might

be going on in our lives. Watching the way the children at Chestnut Tree House react to their new woodland walk makes me more convinced than ever.

**To find out more about Greenfingers, its work and the Rosy Cheeks Appeal, go to [www.greenfingerscharity.org.uk](http://www.greenfingerscharity.org.uk)**

**TOP** The green canopy of the woods is still visible from inside the teepee. **BELOW LEFT** This top-of-the-range teepee was donated to the hospice so that the children could experience the feeling of 'camping' under canvas. **BELOW RIGHT** A high ridge of wildflowers in an area off the path allows wheelchair users to get closer to nature.

