

ARTICLE

# ‘Ways of being’ in the domestic garden for people living with dementia: doing, sensing and playing

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## Abstract

Domestic gardens represent a site for enacting embodied identity and social relationships in later life, and negotiating tensions between continuity and change. In the context of dementia, domestic gardens have significant implications for ‘living well’ at home, and for wider discussions around embodiment, relational selfhood and agency. Yet previous studies exploring dementia and gardens have predominantly focused on care home or community contexts. In light of this, the paper explores the role of domestic gardens in the everyday lives of people living with dementia and their households, using qualitative, creative methods. This includes filmed walking interviews and garden tours, diaries and sketch methods, involving repeat visits with six households in England. Findings are organised thematically in relation to different ‘ways of being’ in the garden: working in and doing the garden; being in and sensing; and playing, empowerment and agency. These different ‘ways of being’ are situated within relationships with household members, neighbours and non-human actors, including pets, wildlife and the materiality of the garden. Garden practices illustrate continuity, situated within embodied biographies and habitus. However, identities, practices and gardens are also subject to ongoing readjustment and reconstruction. The conclusion discusses implications for extending literature on gardens and later life, describing how social and material relationships in domestic gardens are renegotiated in the context of dementia, while highlighting opportunities for ‘play’, active sensing and agency. We also explore contributions to understandings of dementia, home and place, and implications for garden design and care practice.

**Keywords:** dementia; gardens; home; practice; everyday life; creative methods

## Introduction

This paper explores the role of domestic gardens within the everyday lives of people living with dementia and their households. The importance of domestic gardens

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and outdoor spaces for wellbeing is now widely recognised and has been brought to the fore during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Corley *et al.*, 2021), still ongoing at the time of writing. The significance of domestic gardens for wellbeing continues into later life (Scott *et al.*, 2020) and, in the United Kingdom (UK), gardening is most popular among older age groups (Seddon, 2011).

However, little is known about how living with dementia affects everyday experiences of domestic gardens (Newton *et al.*, 2021). This contrasts with a growing body of research in care home and community contexts which highlights the ongoing significance of gardens for supporting wellbeing, identity and social relationships (for review, see Whear *et al.*, 2014; Barrett and Evans, 2019). There is a tendency in some previous literature on dementia and gardens to focus on gardening activities as supporting the maintenance of identity and personhood *versus* a loss of identity in relation to the impairment of gardening abilities (e.g. Olsson *et al.*, 2013; Chung *et al.*, 2017). This often entails a focus specifically on *gardening*, rather than multiple garden practices and ways of encountering gardens. There is also a tendency in some previous literature to represent garden use as an individualised activity (Raisborough and Bhatti, 2007), where safety, risk and individual ‘outcomes’ take priority over the relational dimensions which shape garden practices (Rendell and Carroll, 2015; Marsh *et al.*, 2018). As such, little is known about how household relationships enable or constrain the garden practices of people living with dementia (Newton *et al.*, 2021).

To begin to remedy this picture, this paper draws on practice and relational approaches. Rather than viewing identity as something that is lost or maintained, these approaches emphasise that identities are always in a process of becoming, emerging from everyday actions and interactions between human and non-human actors (Lovatt, 2018). Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of social practice, Kontos (2004) describes embodied agency and spontaneity in people living with dementia’s engagement with their social and material environments. However, she emphasises that these embodied ways of being-in-the-world are also shaped by habitus – ingrained, tacit dispositions that reflect social location. More recently, Kontos *et al.* (2017a: 182) have called for attention to ‘relational citizenship’ in the context of dementia, recognising the ‘reciprocal nature of engagement and the centrality of capacities, senses, and experiences of bodies to the exercise of human agency and interconnectedness’. Building on these theoretical insights, this paper examines the relational nature of domestic garden uses when living with dementia, exploring different ‘ways of being’ in the garden, categorised as: doing and working in the garden; being in and sensing; and playing, empowerment and agency.

## The sociology of domestic gardens

Domestic gardens have been described as an extension of the home, situated within everyday practices of home-making; ‘daily routines and activities (necessarily embodied, gendered, and aged) rooted in time and space that contribute towards the creation and re-creation of the domestic sphere’ (Bhatti, 2006: 321). The garden, like the home, is a space that is unfinished, always in a state of ‘becoming’ (Bhatti, 2006) and ‘movement’ (Pink, 2012) as the garden changes over time. Domestic gardens are part of the temporal and spatial ordering of home, but also the

construction of home as a 'state of being' and a phenomenological sense of 'being at home' in the world (Jackson, 1995). Like the home, the garden is a space for the 'construction and projection of identity' (Bhatti, 2006: 323) through material connections to memories and biographies, and implications for status and distinction through the display of gardens (Taylor, 2008). Anthropological literature has also highlighted the garden as a sensory space and gardening as a practice that involves embodied and tacit ways of knowing (Pink, 2012).

Gardens have a socio-cultural order (Bhatti, 2006) in terms of household relationships and the wider neighbourhood, and their location within shifting social divisions in wider society. Garden practices in the UK have been historically gendered: growing vegetables and maintaining lawns is associated with masculinity; whilst growing plants and herbs is regarded as the 'decorative' aspect of gardening, associated with femininity (Taylor, 2008). Allotments especially have been associated with working-class masculinity. Gardening has also been examined within gendered meanings of work and leisure. For instance, for many women the home and garden represent a space of unpaid work and reflect challenges in carving out time and space for leisure (see e.g. Deem, 1988; Green *et al.*, 1990). Gendered meanings of the home and garden have changed over time, reflecting shifting gender relations in wider society (Bhatti and Church, 2000). Yet, research suggests that gendered divisions of labour remain among heterosexual couples, with men being more likely to do gardening work with machinery and tools, carrying out 'heavy' tasks, in ways which support and aspire towards images of hegemonic masculinity (Taylor, 2008).

Research on gardens also highlights changing embodied and relational experiences of domestic gardens over the lifecourse. Gardens have been depicted as a site of play and imagination during childhood, a site of family leisure in adulthood and a hobby during retirement (Milligan and Bingley, 2015). In the context of later life, gardens can represent a site of resistance, where older people can continue to express their identity and agency (Bhatti, 2006). However, with the onset of 'fourth age' and experiences of illness or impairment in later life, the relationship to gardens can become troubled, and difficulties maintaining gardens can become a reminder of changes associated with the ageing body (Milligan *et al.*, 2004; Bhatti, 2006). Literature on ageing and gardens reflects a tension between gardens as a site where identity is maintained in later life, and a site where it is diminished or disrupted (Milligan and Bingley, 2015).

### Dementia and gardens

There is a growing body of research on the benefits of gardens for the wellbeing and quality of life of people living with dementia (Whear *et al.*, 2014; Barrett and Evans, 2019; Newton *et al.*, 2021). The potential of gardens to support continuity in identity and personhood has been a key theme in this literature (Newton *et al.*, 2021). For example, Chalfont and Rodiek (2005) describe the possibilities for enacting previous identities in care home gardens, and for connecting to memories and biographies. In their research on community gardens, Noone and Jenkins (2018) emphasise the significance of gardening activities as part of enacting embodied selfhood. Chung *et al.* (2017) explored the role of family carers in supporting the

agency and personhood of people living with dementia, including an example of a family carer enabling a person living with dementia to continue gardening. However, Olsson *et al.* (2013) highlight the tension between outdoor activities confirming identity and independence for people living with dementia *versus* a loss of previous abilities and activities.

Gardens have potential for facilitating social ties and sensory connections to nature for people living with dementia (Newton *et al.*, 2021). Research in care home and community gardens demonstrates the sensory enjoyment of outdoor spaces and ‘getting outside’, for instance, the feel of fresh air, the visual appearance and texture of plants, and the sound of birds singing (Chalfont and Rodiek, 2005; Duggan *et al.*, 2008; Barrett and Evans, 2019). Previous research in care homes describes residents with dementia engaging in ‘social walking’ (McAllister and Silverman, 1999) or sitting together in the garden (Hernandez, 2007), and the use of gardens as a space to meet with visiting friends and relatives (Whear *et al.*, 2014). Noone and Jenkins (2018) describe the potential of community gardens for facilitating new friendships between people living with dementia, while research on outdoor spaces and neighbourhoods illustrates how gardens can facilitate social connections with the wider neighbourhood (Li *et al.*, 2021).

In care home and sometimes community contexts, positive experiences of gardens are in tension with concerns about risk (Newton *et al.*, 2021). Staff concerns about risk sometimes lead to access to gardens being restricted in care homes, even when gardens are designed to be safe and secure (Chalfont, 2013; Buse *et al.*, 2018). In care homes, the potential benefits of gardens are further constrained by a lack of staff time to support people living with dementia with accessing gardens (van den Berg *et al.*, 2020). In one study of a community garden project, volunteers and care staff supporting people living with dementia similarly expressed concerns about risk, however, there was a greater emphasis on supporting positive risk taking (Marsh *et al.*, 2018). It is unknown whether these concerns about risk continue to constrain garden use in domestic gardens (Newton *et al.*, 2021), or how the social relationships in domestic households shape everyday experiences of using gardens.

The majority of this research has taken place in care home settings or community gardens, and there is very little research on the implications of domestic gardens for people with dementia who are living at home. This lack of research extends to the design literature where the focus has been on care home or health-care settings and sensory design for dementia (*e.g.* Chalfont and Walker, 2013; University of Worcester, 2021). A recent systematic narrative review of the literature on this topic area (Newton *et al.*, 2021) identified only six papers from around the world that examined domestic gardens in relation to lived experience of dementia. However, even then, none of the six articles focused exclusively on the domestic garden and all were part of broader studies on outdoor spaces and neighbourhoods (Duggan *et al.*, 2008; Olsson *et al.*, 2013; Li *et al.*, 2021), home adaptations (Allen *et al.*, 2019) or carer experiences (Chung *et al.*, 2017; Silverman, 2018). Worryingly, the review also found that further research is needed to foreground the person with dementia’s lived experience of domestic gardens as their involvement in study design and reporting was lacking (Newton *et al.*, 2021; *see also* Barrett and Evans, 2019). There is, therefore, a need for further examination of how people

with dementia who are living at home use their gardens, and the location of garden practices within social relationships, temporalities and material arrangements of domestic spaces. The study that we will now share is, to the best of our knowledge, the first in the world to address this overlooked area.

## The study

The My Home, My Garden Story project aimed to examine the role of domestic gardens in the everyday lives of people with dementia who are living at home, using creative qualitative methods to capture the multi-sensory and embodied aspects of interactions with place (Ward and Campbell, 2013). The researcher (Swift) carried out repeat visits and creative interviews with six people living with dementia and members of their household (see Table 1). The research took place in northern England between March and July 2020. The first visit involved a qualitative sit-down interview in participants' homes and a filmed walking interview in their garden. Walking around gardens can act as a springboard for reflections and memories (Hitchings and Jones, 2004) and filming the walking interviews helped to capture the embodied and sensory aspects of interactions with gardens (Keady *et al.*, 2018). During the walking interviews the researcher (Swift) used the materiality of the garden as a prompt for discussion and observed how the person living with dementia interacted with plants, pets and materialities as they walked around the garden. Following the interview, participants were invited to complete a diary of their garden use for a week, using the format that best suited their interests and abilities (including photo-diaries, written diaries and filmed diaries), or a combination of methods. Diaries enable activities to be recorded as they occur, helping to overcome difficulties with memory recall (Bartlett, 2011), and shedding light on mundane and tacit aspects of everyday life (Pilcher *et al.*, 2016). Following the completion of diaries, the second visit involved a follow-up interview to explore the meanings of diaries with participants.

During fieldwork the methods had to be altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so later visits were conducted remotely using Zoom.<sup>1</sup> This included the sit-down component of initial interviews and follow-up interviews, and the walking interviews, which became filmed garden tours led by the participants, using their own tablet computers. Conducting interviews via Zoom still gave some important insights into people's experiences of their gardens, and the Zoom garden tours enabled the research team (all the authors) to explore the visual and sensory aspects of the gardens remotely. However, there were challenges and limitations, *e.g.* some participants living with dementia were less comfortable with remote video communications and one household instead opted to take part in their follow-up interview via telephone (see Table 1). It must be noted that all our participants were in couples, whereas reliance on remote video communications may be more challenging for some people living with dementia who are living alone and need support with these technologies, which was an issue in our working group (see below).

In a sense, these remote methods were more participant-led, as participants held the tablet during the Zoom garden tour and guided the filming and discussion.

**Table 1.** Participant information

Description	Age	Occupational status	(Former) occupation	Data collected
Household 1: Norma (person living with dementia) and her husband Andrew have lived in their home for 40 years. They have a back garden, with a small flagged area, and fruit trees in the centre. Norma was a keen gardener and they have opened their garden for public viewings. As her dementia has progressed Andrew has (reluctantly) become involved with gardening.	70+	Retired	Norma – magistrate Andrew – army officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit-down interview</li> <li>• Filmed walking interview</li> </ul>
Household 2: Sandra (person living with dementia) and her husband Mike have lived in their home for around 40 years. They have front and back gardens; the back garden has a steep slope with a retaining wall and steps into the garden. Sandra is the main gardener and enjoys gardening, Mike does jobs involving ‘heavy’ tools.	70+	Retired	Sandra – catering, technical instructor Mike – sales manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit-down interview</li> <li>• Filmed walking interview</li> <li>• Diary</li> <li>• Zoom follow-up interview</li> </ul>
Household 3: Frank (person living with dementia) lives with his wife Emma. They met later in life and have been together for 13 years. They have a back garden with steps leading into it, a flagged area and a ‘sensory garden’. Emma is the main gardener, although Frank enjoys spending time in the garden.	70+	Retired	Frank – area manager Emma – housewife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit-down interview</li> <li>• Filmed walking interview</li> <li>• Diary</li> <li>• Telephone follow-up interview</li> </ul>
Household 4: Karen (person living with dementia) and her partner Lynne have lived in their house for 20 years. They have a large back garden with an orchard and summerhouse. They enjoy working in the garden together, although Karen is finding it more challenging as her dementia has progressed.	50–59	Karen – retired Lynne – working	Karen – senior lecturer, social worker, nurse Lynne – local authority worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoom sit-down interview</li> <li>• Zoom garden tour</li> </ul>
Household 5: Judy (person living with dementia) and her husband Phil have lived in their house for 19 years. They have a back yard and	50–59	Judy – retired Phil – working	Judy – administrator Phil – firefighter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoom sit-down interview</li> </ul>

a small front yard. Their yard is a shared enterprise, and they both enjoy gardening and spending time in the yard.	70+	Retired	Martin – headmaster Justine – charity worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Zoom garden tour</li><li>• Diary</li><li>• Follow-up interview</li></ul>
Household 6: Martin (person living with dementia) lives with his wife Justine. They have lived in their house since their children were small, and they have front and back gardens. Justine is the main gardener; Martin does not enjoy gardening, although he enjoys spending time in the garden.	70+	Retired	Martin – headmaster Justine – charity worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Zoom sit-down interview</li><li>• Zoom garden tour</li><li>• Diary</li><li>• Follow-up interview</li></ul>

However, it was often the carer who conducted the filming during garden tours, and sometimes the person living with dementia walked away from the camera and their interactions were lost. During *in situ* walking interviews, it was easier to involve the person living with dementia, using the garden as material prompt, and observing their embodied interactions with gardens. This is particularly important for people who struggle with verbal communication, although embodied interactions were recorded during sit-down interviews through Swift's fieldnotes and were captured on some Zoom garden tours (*see e.g.* the example below of Lynne and Karen). While in sit-down interviews both participants remained in front of the camera, engagements with the materialities of the home and garden (*e.g.* discussing the view through the window or participants showing the researcher photographs of their garden) were somewhat diminished in Zoom interviews. The diary component of the research was least affected by COVID-19, as a method that is conducted 'remotely' away from the researcher, although participants stated that diaries reflected changes in their activities during the pandemic, with more time spent at home and within the garden.

Some aspects of the methods were more significantly altered due to COVID-19 restrictions. Originally, the study planned to use ethnographic observations of garden practices in addition to the above methods, but this was unable to take place. We planned to record these observations using sketch reportage, working with artist Lynne Chapman. Sketch reportage involves sketching visual and verbal practices *in situ*, using long 'concertina sketchbooks' to record events in sequence as they unfold (Brown *et al.*, 2021). Sketching can provide a method of 'concentrated seeing', enabling places and interactions to be distilled, and capturing atmosphere and meaning beyond what can be seen visually (Heath *et al.*, 2018). However, this method had to be adapted to Lynne sketching remotely from films of the garden tours. Providing participants with a copy of the sketches gave them a more immediate record of what was said in the interviews, and why it is significant, and enabled the researchers to 'give something back' to participants in the short term (Brown *et al.*, 2021).

### **Collaboration with people living with dementia**

During the study we worked with a local working group of older people living with dementia as our project partner, aiming to embed their involvement into the design and development of the study. Buse (principal investigator) and Swift (researcher) met with the working group during the early stages of the project to discuss our plans for the research. We conducted a further meeting towards the end of fieldwork to share our emerging data and themes and invite their feedback, aiming for this to inform the analysis and writing up of findings, and the design of our future research on this topic. As with data collection, collaboration had to be adapted during the pandemic, and our second meeting was conducted via Zoom. Zoom was the technology used by this working group for their regular meetings and was therefore familiar, although one participant who was living alone required support from the group facilitator (who was in her support bubble<sup>2</sup>) to set up Zoom. One participant living with dementia dropped out of the second meeting, due to finding group discussions on Zoom difficult to follow. During the project

we also worked with a project advisory group of gardeners, designers and landscape architects to inform the design and development of the research and explore implications for design and practice.

### **Study participants**

Six households in the north of England participated in the fieldwork; each included a person living with dementia and their partner or spouse (see Table 1). Participants were recruited with support from the working group and through a voluntary-sector organisation supporting people living with dementia. Participants were sampled purposively, according to whether they met the study inclusion criteria, namely being a person with dementia with capacity who is living at home; uses and can access a garden (including gardens, yards and balconies adjacent to the home); lives in the same household as another person; and has capacity to give consent.

### **Ethics**

Capacity to consent was assessed in discussion with the person with dementia according to the principles of the Mental Capacity Act (2005). As this study was conducted over an extended period of time, consent was viewed as an ongoing process throughout the study (Dewing, 2007), and attention was paid to any verbal or non-verbal signs of dissent, indicating the person no longer wished to participate (Black *et al.*, 2010). To facilitate the consent process, easy-to-read versions of the information sheet and consent form were prepared in accordance with guidance on dementia-friendly information (Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project, 2013), and the study was also explained verbally by the researcher visiting the household. Ethical approval was granted by Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Research Ethics Committee at the University of York.

### **Analysis**

Data were analysed thematically, and the analysis was informed by a sensitivity to embodied and sensory aspects of interactions with gardens (Pink, 2015) and to stories and narratives (Riessman, 2008). While examining themes and patterns in data across households, in keeping with narrative thematic analysis we started with analysis of different forms of data from individual households, and retained sensitivity to biographical narratives and reoccurring stories, and their implications for identity construction (Riessman, 2008). Analysis involved exploring dialogue between different forms of data, viewing video data alongside transcripts, diaries and visual images. Watching video data provides a way to revisit and reconstruct the sensory and embodied experiences of places and interactions (Pink, 2015). The research team met regularly online to discuss and analyse data from films, transcripts and photographs. Emergent themes were also discussed with the working group of people living with dementia, and with project advisors including landscape architects and garden designers (see above). Initial thematic categories were

then reviewed and organised into larger themes. The more formal coding of data was assisted by NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software, applying themes developed by the research team to coding the data. The themes presented in the paper focus on three ‘ways of being’ in the garden: working in and doing the garden; being in and sensing; and play, empowerment and agency. They also incorporate data from cross-cutting themes around biographies, identity, change and adaptation.

## Findings

### **Theme 1: Working in and ‘doing’ the garden**

In participants’ interviews and diaries, the garden emerged as a space that needs ongoing work and is always in flux. As one participant Emma (family carer, household 3) said, ‘it’s still a work in progress – all gardens are really’. Activities such as weeding, raking, tidying, watering, digging and pruning were part of participants’ everyday routines, as well as being situated within the cycles of the seasons. During the walking interview, Sandra (person living with dementia, household 2) was continually tidying up the garden and removing dead heads from plants. Her tidying and adjusting of the garden are captured in the sketch in [Figure 1](#), illustrating how as she walked around the garden she was regularly bending down to pull off dead heads or pull out weeds, explaining ‘I’ll just take that bit off and put it in the bin’ or ‘wait a minute, get those dead leaves off’. The fluid, sketchy lines reflect Sandra’s constant movement during the walking interview. Her walking interview took place in spring and as she walked around she pointed out where the ‘snowdrops [are] growing through the heather’ and the ‘little daffodils’, as well as plants that were still ‘coming through’.

For Sandra, doing the garden is central to enacting her identity, reflecting embodied biographies (Williams, 2000), dispositions and skills acquired over a lifetime (Kontos, 2004). Sandra had always been ‘the gardener’ in her household. Mike (family carer, household 2) described how she became ‘more fully involved’ with the gardening because he was often away working, while she was at home with their son, reflecting gendered biographies and divisions of labour (Taylor, 2008). Verbally she distanced herself from any claims to be an expert gardener saying ‘I couldn’t say that I’m a perfect gardener’, but she enacted this role through embodied practice.

Sandra and Mike’s diary illustrated how she continued to take responsibility for the majority of physical labour in the garden, and the physicality of ‘doing’ the gardening was central to her enjoyment of it, as discussed in the follow-up interview:

- Mike: And you could tell [in the diary] that Sandra did most of the work ... Sandra never sits down in the garden...
- Sandra: Just keeping on top of it ... Raking the lawn, that’s mostly it. And it’s just developing.
- Mike: Yeah, she did, with a lawn rake, rake the lawn. That’s hard work.
- Sandra: No, that’s good fun! (Sandra (family carer) and Mike (person living with dementia), household 2)



**Figure 1.** Sandra doing the gardening.  
Source: Sketch by Lynne Chapman.

Here Sandra corrected Mike when he suggested that raking is ‘hard work’, pointing out her enjoyment of it, evidencing the subjective and complex meanings of the garden as a space of work and leisure (Deem, 1988; Green *et al.*, 1990). This reflects gendered and classed habitus (Kontos, 2004) – for working-class women, there is often an emphasis on gardening in terms of ordering and tidying, rather than on cultivating a particular aesthetic (Taylor, 2008). The physical labour of gardening is part of ‘enabling ... authority to enjoy and control the space that she creates’ (Raisborough and Bhatti, 2007: 471), illustrating how people living with dementia can continue to enact agency and identity through embodied practices of gardening (Noone and Jenkins, 2018) which are pleasurable.

Yet while gardening is situated within biographical continuity at an embodied level, it also reflects changes associated with dementia and within life more broadly, requiring ongoing adjustments to practices, identities and material arrangements. Mike talked about how he and Sandra spend more time in the garden together now and ‘it’s very rare one of us works in the garden [without] the other’. This partly reflects the fact that he is now retired, but also their shared concerns about one of them falling on the steps if they are working out there alone. Spending more time in the garden together emerged as a theme across other couples, providing a way to support enabled risk (Rendell and Carroll, 2015; Noone, 2018).

For other participants, working in the garden was situated within processes of renegotiating and reconstructing identities and relationships in the context of living with dementia (Charmaz, 2002), rather than as part of biographical continuity (Williams, 2000). Martin (person living with dementia, household 6) had never been interested in gardening and referred to Justine (family carer, household 6) as the ‘expert’ gardener, saying ‘certainly Justine is the one that knows about the gardening’. Martin states he has ‘never chosen’ to do the gardening, reflecting household divisions of expertise where Justine is ‘so keen on it, and I can’t keep up with that’. However, he observed that ‘obviously that’s got even worse as the

dementia's crept in' and he described himself 'walking behind' Justine when assisting in the garden so that he did not 'do things wrong'. Spending time with Justine in the garden had become more frequent since the onset of his dementia, and retiring from his job as a headmaster:

It must be a part of dementia, is that once you realise you've got it ... you can't control it, but you know when to actually stand back and when you can be involved. And that's been a terrific learning curve for me over the last couple of years ... And I find it quite hard to be in company now ... because of what I was, in terms of headteacher, and we had a very vibrant school, great reputation ... And that's all gone. I couldn't, I couldn't actually risk any of those sort of things now ... I'll stand behind Justine [in the garden], poor old Justine has to get all the wrongs put right, don't you! (Martin (person living with dementia), household 6)

'Walking behind', 'standing back' or 'following behind' are very powerful metaphors in Martin's description of how dementia creates challenges for contributing to everyday tasks such as gardening, and getting things 'right'. As Martin said, 'poor old Justine has to get all the wrongs put right'. There is a sense of sadness in terms of the loss of Martin's work identity, and the status associated with this, felt especially in contrast to challenges he now experiences with everyday practices. Martin explained how he needs clear instruction from Justine when helping with tasks in the garden 'because I can just lose it in the moment' and 'I'm finding short term I can easily forget things'.

However, Martin's discussions of the garden also suggest readjustment to new ways of being together in the garden and carving out new identities. Identities are constructed through habitual daily activities and when these activities are disrupted due to illness, this necessitates their reconstruction (Charmaz, 2002). The couple now spend more time in the garden together and Martin reflected that 'I'm quite happy to go out if Justine will give me a chore, something to do out there', suggesting that being in the garden with Justine in this way might be giving him a new sense of purpose and 'replacement work' (Milligan and Bingley, 2015: 327). He described 'walking behind' as a deliberate adjustment of his practice to support Justine, because 'I'm aware that if I do things wrong it's going to make it twice as hard for Justine'. At the same time, he referred to himself more actively as the 'digger man', constructing a new identity through physical labour, perhaps associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as digging, clearing out the shed or mowing the lawn (Taylor, 2008). Their diary depicts an occasion when Martin became absorbed in the task of mowing the lawn:

After lunch I had some things to do indoors and Martin wanted to cut the grass. It was good to have some space from each other and he managed fine. It began to rain briefly just as he finished. He did come in eventually! (Extract from Martin (person living with dementia) and Justine's (family carer) diary, household 6, Sunday 26 April 2020)

This extract illustrates Martin's determination to finish mowing the lawn, and the garden as a site for enabling space and time apart, as well as new ways of being together.

During the follow-up interview, Martin read a poem he had written – this excerpt captures something of the complexity of his experience of working in the garden, in a creative, evocative fashion:

Our garden ... Days, weeks, months, years, how time passes, tears for fears.  
 Our garden ... needs to be done, don't agonise, it might be fun.  
 Procrastination rules my head, I've other things to do instead, with planning out  
 perfect plots, of rearranging plants and pots, to where I think they need to grow, to  
 make our plot a flower show.  
 Yet need to be done, the challenge set, soil is stable, not too wet, spade and fork  
 then hoe hoe hoe, it's off to work I go go go.  
 ...Oh dear, a vicious circle looms, time to gather pots and brooms, store those  
 forks, hang high the spade, reflect the tiny change you've made.

This poem captures the garden as a space that is always 'becoming' (Bhatti, 2006), describing how 'days, weeks, months' pass in the garden, yet a considerable amount of work only manifests in 'tiny change'. It illustrates Martin's ambivalence about working in the garden – his statement the garden 'needs to be done' suggests a reluctance to work in the garden, which is then softened by the statement 'it might be fun'. The poem also moves between Martin's first-person voice and the perspective of the couple, mixing his internal monologue with a voice from his relationship. This reflects the relational experience of working in the garden together, and the reconfiguration of the couples' relationship and roles in the garden. The invocation of 'perfection' and 'flower show' in Martin's poem points to a tension between working in the garden as an end in itself, and the domestic garden as a semi-public space, subject to external judgements by visitors and neighbours. This creates additional pressures around 'getting it right' when doing the garden.

### **Theme 2: 'Being in' and 'sensing'**

For some participants, enjoying the garden was not about the physicality of 'doing' the gardening, but the sensory experience of 'being in' the garden. In some literature on gardens and dementia or ageing there is a tendency to distinguish between 'active' and 'passive' garden practices (e.g. Bhatti, 2006; Newton *et al.*, 2021). However, the walking interviews revealed how sitting in the garden can involve an active engagement with the sensory experience of the garden and 'being in the moment'. This is captured by a sketch of Frank (person living with dementia, household 3) during the walking interview, in a moment where he sat on the bench enjoying the feel of the warm sunshine and the sensory experience of stroking one of their ragdoll cats (see Figure 2).

Far from being 'passive', the sketch illustrates how Frank actively initiates a moment of sensory and embodied engagement with his surroundings, and a moment of connection with his cat. As suggested by the image (Figure 2), 'being in' the garden also involves 'being alongside' (Latimer, 2013) at a multi-sensory level – spending time with partners, friends and family, and also with plants, pets and wildlife, whilst engaging in other activities like eating (Jenkins, 2017).



**Figure 2.** Frank enjoying the sensory experience of the garden.  
 Source: Sketch by Lynne Chapman.

For Frank, a focus on 'being in' the garden reflected his biography – he has never enjoyed doing the gardening, but he enjoys sitting outside in the garden, particularly with an ice cream or coffee. Similarly, while Martin (person living with dementia, household 6) was not confident about 'making a garden look like a garden', he stated: 'I love being in the garden, love being outside.' However, for other participants there was an increased emphasis on 'being' rather than 'doing' the garden in response to changes associated with dementia and the ageing body. Lynne (family carer, household 4) and Karen (person living dementia, household 4) reflected that they worked in the garden and 'did absolutely everything' together but that 'it's a little trickier now' as Karen's dementia had progressed. Lynne described how 'Karen's derived a lot of peace and relaxation' from the sensory experience of 'being in' the garden:

And she [Karen] loves being outside in the garden, and it's that open space, the sound of the birds. We have lots of nesting birds, as well as chickens, and we have two dogs ... we both find, in separate ways, a lot of comfort and space out there. (Lynne (family carer), household 4)

This quote captures how the sensory enjoyment of being in the garden involves listening to the birds, and 'being alongside' their chickens and two dogs. As Lynne noted, being in the garden was important to them both, creating time together and apart. Karen struggled with verbal communication, however, during the Zoom garden tour we observed her walking over and sitting in 'her chair' in the sunshine, stroking their dog, demonstrating her enjoyment of 'being in' and 'being alongside'.

As well as sitting in the garden, 'sensing' and 'being in' can involve walking around the garden. Pink (2012: 95) has described how gardeners articulate their

'way of being with plants' by walking through the garden, touching plants and talking about them. Although Sandra (person living with dementia, household 2) 'never sits' in the garden, walking through the garden is part of her everyday practice of inhabiting the space. During the walking interview, Sandra pointed to and touched various plants and trees that she had grown, demonstrating her expertise, for instance: 'that's viburnum, isn't it. That pink one'. As she was walking around, seeing and hearing birds in the garden also prompted memories:

I love the birds. Because I used to have a grandad that was very good. He used to drive horse and carriages in London. And he was lovely ... he kept chickens!  
(Sandra (person living with dementia), household 2)

Other participants talked about 'pottering' as a way of 'being in' the garden. For instance, while Norma (person living with dementia, household 1) struggled to keep up with maintaining her garden as a space of display, 'pottering' was central to her ongoing enjoyment of the garden. The walking practices of people living with dementia are often pathologised as 'wandering' and viewed as risky (Wigg, 2010). In our study, participants made material adjustments to their gardens to enable safe 'pottering' or walking. For instance, Andrew (family carer, household 1) had put 'green eye guards' on top of posts in the garden, in case Norma fell and caught herself on them – an idea suggested by their niece's husband. During the walking interview, Emma (family carer, household 3) was continually assessing and adjusting the garden to manage potential risks, for instance, moving a pot that Frank (person living with dementia, household 3) might fall over and considering where they might put in a handrail by the steps, in anticipation of future risks of falling.

The garden became part of not only 'being in the moment' for people living with dementia and their families, but of curating a series of meaningful moments (Keady *et al.*, 2022) throughout the day. Keady *et al.* (2022: 687) describe 'being in the moment' as: 'the multi-sensory processes involved in a personal or relational interaction and embodied engagement'. Sometimes these moments emerged spontaneously, but the material arrangements of the garden – the positioning of seating, food and drink, proximity to pets or loved ones – could also be deliberately organised to support enjoyable moments. Frank follows the sun around the garden during the day and sits on different seats to catch the sun at different times, as his wife Emma describes:

We've got seating for different times of the day. Sometimes you want the blue seat at the end, just right for an early morning cup of coffee, because that's the first place to catch the sun. And in the end of the day the bench here catches the sun, so that's a nice place to sit later in the day. (Emma (family carer), household 3)

Emma described deliberately curating these moments 'I'm much more aware of making it a pleasant place to draw Frank out ... to sit in the garden ... have his cup of tea out here instead of indoors.' She tried to create a space that was inviting at a sensory level, planting flowers with vivid colours and fragrances, and brightly coloured garden furniture. This reflects an extension of practices of home-making

in the context of dementia (Bhatti, 2006: 321), and an ongoing process of tinkering to facilitate Frank's engagement with the garden.

The carefully curated materiality of the garden could be disrupted by the changing weather and seasons. The significance of the weather in shaping moments of 'being in' the garden was prominent in participants' diaries:

Sunday 19 April 2020

Lovely sunny day today so we both sat outside in the back garden listening to the neighbours pottering about in their garden. It got a little windy so we came in about 12.15 to make some lunch.

In the afternoon we sat out in the garden for a cup of tea, but again it was a bit too windy so we didn't stay out for long. (Extract from Judy (person living with dementia) and Phil's (family carer) diary, household 5)

This extract illustrates the sensory experience of 'being in' the garden, enjoying the sunshine, listening to the neighbours pottering about next door. Keady *et al.* (2022) describe how 'moments' may be ended by the person living with dementia, or by others involved in the interaction – in this case the moment was ended by the windy weather. On rainy days participants reported that they did not go out much, or limited garden activities to essential tasks and the garden became more of a 'chore'. Enjoyment of 'being in' the garden also declined during the winter, as Emma (family carer, household 3) said she would just go out for a 'quick tidy up now and again'. Judy (person living with dementia, household 5) and Phil (family carer, household 5) do not use their yard much in the winter, because 'it's only a small space, it just becomes more utility really in the winter'. However, for some participants, in bad weather the sensory experience of 'being in' the garden could be recreated from a window or conservatory, as Emma said, 'the big window overlooks the garden ... even in the winter ... you can see the sky and the birds, things growing'. For Karen (person living with dementia, household 4) and Lynne (family carer, household 4), their summerhouse provided a space to enjoy the garden all year around. However, the ability to enjoy the garden in all weathers can be constrained by the garden design and amount of available space.

### **Theme 3: Playing, enjoyment and agency**

For some people living with dementia, playing was central to their experience of the garden, and provided opportunities to reassert a sense of everyday creativity and agency (Bellass *et al.*, 2018). Kontos *et al.* (2017b: 58) highlight the significance of play as part of 'relational presence', encapsulating the abilities of people living with dementia to 'initiate, modify and co-construct exquisite moments of engagement ... through affective relationality, reciprocal playfulness and co-constructed imagination'. While Martin's (person living with dementia, household 6) experience of gardening (as discussed above) reflected a loss of work identity, and a lack of confidence, through playing table tennis games in the garden Martin was able to exercise a sense of competency, enjoyment and humour. Martin co-wrote his diary with Justine (family carer, household 6) and they included jokes about

him repeatedly winning table tennis games and her trying to catch up with and beat him:

Friday 24 April 2020

Having completed and cleared our meal we considered a game of table tennis on our front drive. This has become quite a regular activity during these lockdown days and there is absolutely no doubt that I am keen to demonstrate my 'ping-ponging' is, in the not too distant future, going to overcome Martin's casual expectation to win every time! In fact, in spite of disconcerting breezy conditions I won two out of four games, which is my best result so far!

Tuesday 28 April 2020

We played table tennis after lunch. Justine won two games (Her words – it doesn't happen very often!) (Extract from Martin (person living with dementia) and Justine's (family carer) diary, household 6)

Through playing table tennis, Martin is able to reassert a sense of agency. Their discussions of table tennis also demonstrate a reciprocal playfulness between the couple (Kontos *et al.*, 2017b).

Playing in the garden provided an opportunity for relational presence with other family members. Emma (family carer, household 3) talked about her and Frank (person living with dementia, household 3) enjoying spending time playing outside with their granddaughter, whom they look after on a regular basis. She described how 'when our granddaughter's around we play out there. He [Frank] plays a game of bowls with her sometimes'. Although Emma acknowledges that Frank's contribution to gardening is limited, she emphasises his central role in helping to look after their granddaughter through playing together. As illustrated by the sketch in Figure 3, their granddaughter had created a magical fairy garden, with 'quirky ornaments', illustrating 'co-constructed' imagination (Kontos *et al.*, 2017b). This reflects ongoing relationships of care, in which Frank and Emma have supported their daughter and assisted with child care:

Frank: ...we care for our granddaughter. Well, Emma cares for our granddaughter quite a lot. Because her mum's got some problems.

Emma: Yeah, so it's got to be a child-friendly garden, as well as a dementia-friendly garden, hasn't it. (Frank (person living with dementia) and Emma (family carer), household 3)

This discussion of Frank and Emma providing support for their granddaughter challenges the portrayal of people living with dementia as passive recipients of care (Kontos *et al.*, 2017a). Elsewhere in the interview, the couple discuss receiving support from their daughter, for instance, in choosing the ragdoll cats as the right breed for sitting in the garden, suggesting a relationship of mutual support. The discussion illustrates how the garden is co-constructed between the needs of family members, adapted to be 'dementia-friendly' but also 'child-friendly'. These adaptations include replacing a rose over the archway into the garden with a thornless rose, as Emma views thorns as a potential 'hazard' to her, her husband and their granddaughter.



**Figure 3.** Fairy garden created by Frank and Emma's granddaughter.  
Source: Sketch by Lynne Chapman.

One of Frank's main hobbies was playing table tennis – at the time of the first interview he went to a dementia support group to play table tennis, and they did not have a table tennis set in the garden. However, they reflected during the interview that this might be 'an idea' and Emma stated: 'it's keeping an open mind of how you can adapt and change your space and make it more usable'. This reflects how garden practices and spaces require ongoing tinkering to facilitate play, as the interests and practices of people living with dementia change over time. By the time they were recording their diary, Emma had ordered a trestle table for playing table tennis in the garden:

Tuesday 7 April 2020

Today has been a bit chillier, so just a bit of brisk weeding and sweeping to tidy up. I'm concerned that Frank isn't getting much exercise at the moment so I was pleased that a plastic trestle table that I ordered weeks ago was delivered today.

I plan to set it up in the garden for table tennis. With that and boules he will hopefully get moving a bit more.

Update – June 2020

We've certainly been using the garden far more than usual what with the lockdown and the beautiful weather. Frank is still not getting as much exercise as I would like. The boules and table tennis get an occasional airing but he is outdoors more than ever before ... Weather permitting I'm positive Frank will spend more time in the garden, and maybe get a bit of exercise. (Extract from Frank (person living with dementia) and Emma's (family carer) diary, household 3)

The inclusion of a table for table tennis demonstrates ongoing adjustments to make the garden more enjoyable and more useable for Frank, and to reflect his hobbies and interests. But it also suggests a sense of pressure to keep Frank active, reflecting how play is situated within wider discourses around active ageing, and perhaps an attempt to portray an active interest in and use of the garden in the diary (Pilcher *et al.*, 2016). This is situated within the changing seasons, and an attempt to encourage outdoor activity in the spring and summer months.

Like Martin, humour was prominent throughout Frank's interview, illustrating how the garden provided opportunities for jokes and playfulness:

- Interviewer: So what kind of things do you like to do out in the garden?  
 Frank: Well, sit in a chair eating an ice cream is basically my...! Sorry, I'm sorry! I've got this terrible sense of humour! (laughs).  
 Emma: It gets you your vitamin D in the sunshine, doesn't it?  
 Frank: Oh very much so.  
 Emma: Just sitting in the sun having a cup of tea, it's still good for you.  
 Frank: Oh yes. Watch the old hairyplane going over! Looking at the precocious catophractes. I'm acknowledged as a world expert on that by the way.  
 Interviewer: Oh, really!  
 Frank: Oh, haven't lost my ... my sense of humour. (Frank (person living with dementia) and Emma (family carer), household 3)

In this extract Frank demonstrates playfulness, spontaneity and creativity, and also the centrality of humour to enacting his identity. Humour as form of play is an area where Frank is able to exercise agency and competency, supported by Emma's adjustments to the materiality of the garden and everyday garden practices, as part of ongoing practices of home-making in the context of dementia (Bhatti, 2006).

There were, however, constraints on the use of the garden for play. In their diary and interview, Justine (family carer, household 6) and Martin (family carer, household 6) were unable to play table tennis on occasions when the weather was windy or wet. For other participants, the size of the garden constrained possibilities, as Judy (person living with dementia, household 5) and Phil (family carer, household 5) discussed in relation to their yard: 'When the weather's not good ... there's not much you can do out here.' Possibilities for play were also negotiated between household members. Although Emma (family carer, household 3) was continually

tinkering with the garden to make it enjoyable and useable for Frank (person living with dementia, household 3), she was less enthusiastic about Frank's proposition for a model railway in the garden:

- Frank: Well it should be an old man/model railway-friendly [garden] as well!
- Emma: Maybe it should, but it's not likely to happen! (laughs).
- Interviewer: ...so those are the adaptations that you'd like to make to the garden, to put the model railway in?
- Frank: I mean if there's grants in the offing! (laughs). Very much, not sure it'd get past the wife though! (Frank (person living with dementia) and Emma (family carer), household 3)

Play can therefore be a site of negotiation and disagreement, as well as supporting togetherness. However, this discussion again illustrates reciprocal playfulness and humour, and Frank's ongoing ability to imagine what his ideal garden might look like in the future.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper has drawn attention to different ways in which people living with dementia use and experience domestic gardens, focusing on three 'ways of being' in the garden: working in and doing; being in and sensing; and playing. The theme 'doing the garden' illustrates how people living with dementia and the people they live with might remain actively engaged in gardening as a practice. Doing the garden can be part of enacting embodied selfhood, situated within gendered and classed biographies of domestic space (Taylor, 2008). However, it also reflects change, and the renegotiation of everyday practices and household relationships. There are indications too that the semi-public nature of outdoor spaces leads to some tensions in how people navigate their changing capacities in gardening, as they do the garden for themselves with their own values and needs, but also for the view of others and thus with a public aesthetic of what a garden should look like or be.

In contrast to 'doing' the garden, 'sensing' and 'being in' allows continued enjoyment of the garden without concerns about the end result. The significance of the sensory experience of the garden emerges in previous literature in care contexts (Chalfont and Rodiek, 2005; Duggan *et al.*, 2008; Barrett and Evans, 2019). Our findings illustrate how these sensory experiences relate to the material and relational dynamics of domestic gardens – listening to the neighbours pottering next door, having a cup of tea with other household members, stroking a pet or catching the sun on a favourite bench. Far from being passive, 'sensing' was an active way of connecting and 'being alongside' (Latimer, 2013). This has implications for literature on relational citizenship and relational presence, contributing to calls for widening notions of relationships in the context of dementia to include non-human actors (Latimer, 2013; Jenkins, 2017). Experiences of 'being in' the garden were shaped by – and shaped – relationships with partners, family, neighbours, pets, wildlife, plants and material objects. Findings illustrate the agency of non-human

actors in shaping encounters, for instance the presence of pets or the role of the weather in beginning or ending ‘moments’.

In previous literature, the garden as a space of play and imagination has been associated with childhood (Milligan and Bingley, 2015), and has not been explored in connection to later life or dementia. Play is a developing area of research in dementia studies, however, previous scholarship has focused on arts and drama therapies, often in care settings (e.g. Knocker, 2001; Kontos *et al.*, 2017b; Swinnen and de Medeiros, 2018). Our findings illustrate the significance of exploring play in everyday life with dementia, and attending to different spatial and relational contexts in which play, as an aspect of ‘everyday creativity’ (Bellass *et al.*, 2018), occurs and is negotiated. While play has previously been under-researched in the context of dementia and later life due to concerns about infantilisation (Swinnen and de Medeiros, 2018), our research suggests that play can provide opportunities for exercising agency in the context of the garden, and for reconstructing new identities and practices. More research is needed to understand the tensions in play in this context, to better connect it to questions of power and agency, as well as to change and embodiment.

These ‘ways of being’ in the garden are also ways of ‘being in place’ (Li *et al.*, 2021) and ‘being at home’. Through ‘doing’, ‘sensing’ and ‘playing’ in the garden, participants are actively engaged in embodied practices of home-making, involving spatial, temporal and social ordering (Bhatti, 2006). The garden was a significant part of household routines, including the ongoing process of ‘doing’ the garden, and daily routines of ‘being’ in the garden, which are entangled with rituals of tea and coffee drinking, as well as the rhythms of the weather and seasons. Practices of engaging with the garden contribute to the ‘entextured’ and sensory experience of feeling ‘at home’ (Angus *et al.*, 2005: 169). Domestic gardens are always in a state of flux (Bhatti, 2006), and the embodied changes associated with dementia can disrupt a sense of being at home through tacit routines, and the enactment and display of identities. However, by adapting garden practices and the physical space of the garden, participants found new ways of being and feeling at home. The garden also provided a space for reconstructing and adjusting social relationships in the context of dementia, enabling couples to create time and space together and apart in new ways.

This research has implications for policy and for design. There is a growing policy emphasis in the UK on ‘living well’ at home with dementia (Department of Health, 2009, 2016). However, definitions of ‘home’ are not generally extended to encompass domestic gardens. While there is a growing recognition of the need to adapt homes to support people living with illness or disability, including dementia, the emphasis is generally on adapting the *inside* of the home (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). Our findings illustrate the importance of domestic gardens for ‘living well’ at home. Findings also illustrate the significance of embedding flexibility in garden design, recognising that gardens are constantly evolving in relation to the changing needs and practices of people living with dementia. Our research supports arguments for locating design for dementia within ‘design interactions’ involving people, contexts, materials and things (Tseklevs and Keady, 2021), and for ‘relationship-centred design’ (Rendell and Carroll, 2015). Domestic gardens are shaped by a

range of relationships, and were adjusted to be ‘child-friendly’, ‘age-friendly’ and ‘pet/wildlife-friendly’ as well as dementia-friendly. More research is need here again, to explore the ways in which these different ethical and practical commitments are negotiated, how they combine and support each other, or sit uncomfortably or in contradiction, as people with dementia and their families work to adjust their everyday practices.

Findings also have implications for care practice. In care practice, as well as design for dementia, there is often a focus on mitigating risk, particularly in relation to ‘wandering’ (Wigg, 2010), which can lead to restrictions on garden access (Chalfont, 2013). In our research, rather than prohibiting risk, participants enabled safe walking, ‘pottering’ and playing through ongoing ‘tinkering’ with the material arrangements of the garden. Further research is needed to explore if this ‘safely imaginative’ (Rendell and Carroll, 2015: 18) approach is characteristic of domestic households, and if this may change as dementia progresses, or as paid care workers are employed in the home. Recognising the diversity of garden practices is also important for care practice, highlighting the importance of avoiding limiting garden use to prescribed activities, and making room for everyday creativity in the different ways people living with dementia engage with gardens (Bellass *et al.*, 2018).

There are some limitations to the study. Further research is needed to explore these nascent findings using a larger sample incorporating a greater diversity of household and garden types, thereby addressing intersecting divisions around class, gender, race and type of dementia. The study only included people living with dementia who had capacity to consent, however, as dementia progresses this may further alter experiences of using gardens. Conducting the research during the time of COVID-19 resulted in adaptations to methods. As discussed above, the Zoom interviews and garden tours enabled the multi-sensory experience of gardens to be communicated at a distance, and maintained the involvement of people living with dementia as part of the household.

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**Ethical standards.** Ethical approval was granted by the University of York Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee.

## Notes

1 Zoom is an online video-conferencing platform where people can meet remotely.

2 Support bubble refers to UK government guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns that if someone was living alone or had other support requirements they could form a link with another household (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020).

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