

Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. In this regular feature, we profile the borough's great & good or just plain interesting

## hackneypeople

# Gardener's world

Photo: Adam Holt



St Mary's Secret Garden manager and senior horticultural therapist, Paula Yassine, believes community gardening gives people a sense of being in touch with nature and their local surroundings

**W**ANDERING through St Mary's Secret Garden on a mid-summer's morning one's senses are overwhelmed by sweet floral smells, brightly coloured flowers and a feeling of calm.

Nestled in the middle of one of Hoxton's largest estates this restful retreat is a welcome relief to urban living. Garden manager and senior horticultural therapist, Paula Yassine, describes it as a 'peaceful oasis in the middle of a busy area of the capital.'

It provides placements for people with learning difficulties, mental health problems and other long-term illnesses, as well as accredited training for the wider community, and volunteering opportunities.

Paula explains: "St Mary's is a community garden first and foremost.

As you can see we're in the middle of a large estate and not everyone has access to a garden. It gives you a sense of being in touch with nature as well as engaging people with support needs."

Paula has been working with people outdoors for over 20 years providing training in forestry, conservation and horticulture.

She says: "Horticultural training was never on my career list. I was originally a nurse and realised there was a better way of seeing people get better. I went to university in the middle of a field in Wales where I stayed. I joined a 'training for work' scheme run by the National Trust and then came to London."

Paula worked for the Harrington Scheme, which is a training centre for young people with learning disabilities, for seven years before joining

**“Community for me means everyone getting on together as best they can and working together on something”**

St Mary's Secret Garden in 2002. She says: "I enjoy working here because of the range of people I get to work with. I work with people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, older people and school groups. It is a

reflection of the whole community."

Covering three-quarters of an acre, the garden is made up of different themed outdoor 'rooms': a herb and sensory area, decking, vegetable and fruit growing area,

woodland with beehives, wildlife meadow, small pond, and greenhouse.

Wheelchair users can access the garden, and it is designed around a circular path so people with dementia can wander around safely. It's also 'high maintenance', which keeps service users and volunteers busy with the garden all year round.

Paula says: "Gardening is good for you physically, mentally and spiritually. It helps you increase your friendship circles and helps you feel part of society again. People who work in the garden see others enjoying the fruits of their labour."

Community spirit is particularly important to Paula – and something she believes Hackney has in abundance. She has lived in Hoxton, Dalston and Lower Clapton for over 12 years.

She says: "Community

for me means everyone getting on together as best they can and working together on something. It means people looking out for each other and being friends with each other, even if they might not usually be friends with that person.

"That's the great joy of Hackney – you have people from absolutely everywhere in the world. Where else can you get these people to meet these people without paying loads of money to travel?"

"Hackney really is different and I think working in a community setting like this has opened my eyes. I've met so many great people."

### Curriculum Vitae: Paula Yassine

1963	Born in Derbyshire
1981	Trains as a nurse at East Berkshire School of Nursing
1985	Joins the Intensive Care Unit at St Thomas' Hospital, London
1989	Studies Ancient History and Classical Studies at St David's, University College of Wales
1993	Works for the National Trust, Dolaucothi Estate
1998	Works at the Harrington Scheme, London
2002	Joins St Mary's Secret Garden and moves to Hackney
2006	Becomes manager at St Mary's Secret Garden
2013	St Mary's Secret Garden wins gold in Hackney in Bloom

### MORE INFO

For more info on St Mary's Secret Garden, call: 020 7739 2965; or visit: [www.stmaryssecretgarden.org.uk](http://www.stmaryssecretgarden.org.uk)