



Horticultural Therapy¹

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Horticulture is the art and science of growing plants. Horticultural therapy is the practice of engaging people in horticultural activities to improve their bodies, minds, and spirits. Therapeutic benefits occur when people are exposed to plants, and when they take part in planning, planting, growing, and caring for plants. Horticultural therapy is an adaptable tool for clients of all ages and abilities.

Horticulture has been used as a therapeutic treatment modality for centuries. In 1798, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, documented that gardening improved the conditions of mentally ill patients. Spanish hospitals in 1806 used horticultural activities for mentally impaired patients. Gardening as a means of physical and psychological rehabilitation was used in Veterans Administration hospitals for returning world war veterans in the U.S.A. In 1971, Kansas State University began the first horticultural therapy degree program. In 1973, the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) formed and is now the largest horticultural therapy organization in the United States. AHTA oversees the voluntary registration of professional horticultural therapists. Three levels of registration can be earned, beginning with Horticultural Therapist Assistant, progressing

with Registered Horticultural Therapist, and finally, Master Horticultural Therapist.

Horticultural therapy is a worldwide practice. It is used in rehabilitation and vocational centers, youth outreach programs, nursing homes and senior centers, hospitals, hospices, war veteran centers, homeless shelters, penitentiaries, mental health facilities, schools, community gardens, and botanic gardens.

Benefits of Horticultural Therapy

Physical, mental, social, and creative abilities are enhanced through horticultural therapy. The cycles of life are in immediate view in gardens. The ever-present processes of renewal provide encouragement to the suffering. Some of the proven benefits of horticultural therapy include:

- reducing physical pain
- providing sensory stimulation
- improving memory and concentration
- easing emotional pain from bereavement or abuse

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- cultivating nurturing feelings
- encouraging social interaction
- teaching responsibility
- reducing stress and anger
- enhancing productivity and problem solving

While people can benefit from simply viewing and growing plants, with guidance from a horticultural therapist, the benefits of people-plant interactions can be focused and enhanced.

Horticultural Therapy and Sustainable Communities

In addition to treating individuals, horticultural therapy helps to build and strengthen sustainable communities as it teaches clients how to improve their environments with gardening. Horticultural therapy also teaches vocational skills that can be applied in many work settings.

Some horticultural therapy programs connected with social agencies such as homeless shelters and soup kitchens are involved in creating community gardens to grow food to enrich the diets of poverty-stricken families. When horticultural therapy programs create community gardens, especially in previously neglected or abandoned urban areas, they contribute to community sustainability by turning unproductive land into productive land. People establish and strengthen social relationships in community gardens, finding support and friendship, and engaging in productive activities that deter neighborhood drug activity, gangs, and crime.

Horticultural Therapy Resources

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA). <http://www.ahta.org/>

Florida Chapter of AHTA. <http://www.fahta.org>

Rothert, G. 1994. *The enabling garden: Creating barrier-free gardens*. Taylor Publishing Company. Dallas, Texas.

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