

Horticultural Therapy: How Can It Make a Difference in Your Everyday Life?

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Horticultural therapy is the practice of engaging people in horticultural activities to improve their bodies, minds, and spirits. It is a time-tested therapeutic treatment modality for rehabilitation. There are many venues for horticultural therapy, including hospitals and hospices, assisted-living facilities, schools, community gardens, etc. The benefits of horticultural therapy include reducing physical and emotional pain, improving memory, and reducing stress and anger. At home and at work, horticultural therapy can improve the quality of life.

What Is the History of Horticultural Therapy?

Gardening as therapy dates back to the 1700s, when documentation showed a correlation between patients in mental institutions (known as insane asylums) who engaged in gardening activities showed improvements in their physical and mental health. Gardening had been introduced into these facilities out of need, as a means to supply food for the residents and staff. However, for those who participated in these outdoor activities, recovery became an option. In the 1800s, gardening became a teaching aid for mentally handicapped children. Records indicate all their senses were stimulated with outdoor gardening activities; and at the end of the activities, they exhibited pride in their accomplishments. From these early beginnings, and especially with the Menninger Foundation's backing in the early 1900s, psychiatric hospitals today now include horticultural therapy in their patients' recovery programs.

In prisons in the 1800s, just as in the early insane asylums, gardening was done out of necessity. However, prison personnel, then and now, have found that the gardening experience and training has not only led to improved prisoner behavior, but also to gainful employment for inmates upon their release.

During World Wars I and II, war gardens produced 40% of all the produce in the US. It was an important factor in the emotional stability of those at home, as it gave the gardeners a real sense of purpose during that stressful period. After the war, wounded soldiers entered Veterans Administration hospitals, where gardening was promoted by the National Council of Garden Clubs (NCGC). By 1968, the NCGC had 4609 chapters in 36 states and made it a priority to take flowers and gardening activities into these hospitals.

The number of veterans in need of services at our VA hospitals is increasing in large numbers as a result of our aging population and those with wartime physical injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. At the Los Angeles VA hospital, many veterans of the Vietnam War engage in gardening on a 15-acre farm. It provides a source of produce for trendy Los Angeles restaurants, but more importantly, it provides a place of peace and healing for these veterans. All the rehabilitation departments in the Miami VA Hospital include horticultural therapy as a viable treatment modality. Three "Hope and Enabling Therapeutic Gardens" with

a handicapped-accessible greenhouse are part of this very active horticultural therapy program, where two more gardens are being added (A. Karpf, Miami Veterans Affairs Healthcare Systems, personal communication).

The most well-known study in hospitals was conducted by Roger Ulrich in the 1980s and documented in "View through a Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery" (Ulrich, 1984). That study and many since have shown the positive physical and mental effects that people gain from simply viewing plants. Patients' stays in the hospital are shortened and their need for pain medication is lessened as a result of horticultural therapy. As stated by Charles Lewis (Lewis, 1966), "It [a plant] is a beacon reminding patients of the life existing beyond their pain. Yet the plant is also vulnerable, helpless as they are. It too, must be cared for or it will die. Many deeply traumatized patients make their first step toward recovery when they shift their focus from their own suffering to concern for the well-being of their plants." St. Louis Children's Hospital now has a rooftop garden where the young patients participate in gardening. It also provides respite for caregivers—family, nurses, and doctors.

Where Do You Find Horticultural Therapy Programs Today and What Are the Benefits?

In addition to the institutions that have historically used horticultural therapy, it is now employed at rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, hospices, shelters for the homeless and victims of abuse, and substance abuse centers. In addition, horticultural therapy programs are now common at environmental centers, schools, community gardens, botanical gardens, and senior centers.

As our population lives longer, assisted living facilities and other extended-care facilities play a more prominent role in seniors' lives. There is a national movement to evoke culture change in these facilities. Its aim is to transform the sterile hospital-like settings focusing on health and safety to settings more reminiscent of one's home. To make this change, many facilities are adopting programs such as the Eden Alternative where the emphasis is on making a more home-like atmosphere for the residents. This includes letting residents maintain animals and plants in their rooms. In this same mindset, many landscape architects now specialize in healing gardens for healthcare systems. These gardens are meant to meet the needs of all participants;

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from participatory to observatory activities, they can engage in the garden as if they were at home. This new emphasis on quality of life has resulted in happier residents and a lowered staff turnover, which has been traditionally high in these facilities (D. Relf, Virginia Tech, personal communication).

School gardens, vegetable and/or butterfly, are included in some curriculums while others are an extracurricular activity, but all provide an educational and physical experience for children. A horticulture class in Sarasota took its at-risk youth to an assisted living facility and did an intergenerational project with the teens and seniors at the facility. Most of the seniors were either in wheelchairs or used walkers. The seniors gave direction to the teens, who subsequently were able to build raised beds for the facility's butterfly garden. As a result of this activity, the teens' demeanor and social skills improved tremendously as they continued their positive participation in other gardening activities that semester. For the seniors, it gave them someone to socialize with and raised beds in which they could now plant flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

The number of community gardens is increasing across the nation; there are currently four in Sarasota, while Brooklyn, NY has 200. Community gardens provide an oasis for many people, a place away from the strife prevalent in their lives and a place for making new friends. For many neighborhoods, it has provided the foundation for bringing neighbors together and revitalizing their neighborhoods. It creates in them a sense of community pride.

Botanical gardens such as Fairchild, Leu, and Selby offer horticultural therapy classes to the public. Sensory and enabling gardens often have a prominent place in their gardens. Enabling or accessible gardens provide gardening opportunities for everyone regardless of their physical limitations. Sensory gardens contain plants for visual, tactile, audio, aromatic, and taste stimulation. For those who have sensory impairments, these gardens allow them to use more fully their other senses. Stimulating the senses with plants in Alzheimer patients has resulted in rekindled lost memories and experiences.

For hospices, the inclusion of healing gardens is a safe place for bereavement for the patients, as well as family members and staff. Bringing life from the gardens into their rooms in the form of growing plants is part of the horticultural therapy program.

Horticultural therapy has been shown to relieve stress, reduce anger, and improve coping skills. Positive feelings of self worth

and accomplishment are gained from growing and nurturing plants. One learns responsibility while taking care of plants and knowing that a living entity is dependent upon them for its survival. For some, this is the necessary impetus to get up in the morning and to live (D. Relf, Virginia Tech, personal communication).

Facilities for the mentally and physically challenged now often have outdoor nurseries where clients grow and maintain plants and sometimes sell their plants to the public. They take pride in the plants they have nurtured and the paycheck they receive for their time spent working to make them grow.

Gardening is still the number one favorite exercise. It improves fine and gross motor skills and coordination. Exercise also burns calories: 45 minutes of gardening is equal to 30 minutes of aerobics. Gardening improves cognitive thinking, using even simple tasks like counting the number of pots needed for an activity or writing the name of a plant on a label. To meet the needs of an increasingly older population that still wants to garden, the marketplace now has ergonomic gardening tools as well as accessible designs for garden beds. Senior centers such as Friendship Center in Sarasota are including in their expansion plans an enabling garden, where all seniors, regardless of their capabilities, can participate in gardening.

Conclusion

Life circumstances may change and you or someone in your life may need horticultural therapy to maintain or improve the quality of life. By comparing the life cycle of a plant to one's own life, one can see the germination and birth, the nurturance and caretaking, and even the unexpected environmental events and life situations that can occur. At the same time, taking care of a plant is a non-threatening, safe endeavor with many physical, psychological, educational, cognitive, social, and spiritual benefits.

Literature Cited

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