

HORTICULTURAL THERAPY IN NURSING HOMES

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Horticultural therapy is the engagement of a client in garden-related activities, facilitated by a trained therapist, to achieve specific treatment goals. Therapeutic benefits occur when people are exposed to plants, and when they are involved in planning, planting, growing, and caring for plants. Horticultural therapy is an adaptable treatment tool for clients of all ages and abilities. Given that gardening is a popular leisure-time activity for older adults it is particularly well-received with older adult populations.

Horticultural therapy is practiced in healthcare, rehabilitation and vocational facilities, as well as in community programs such as senior centers and community gardens. Several universities and institutions offer certificate, associate, and bachelors degree programs in horticultural therapy. The American Horticultural Therapy Association is a national association serving the profession and offers a voluntary registration system for horticultural therapists.

What research tells us:

Physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities as well as social roles are impacted as a person ages. Gardening can be used in a therapeutic way to address these issues and improve the elder's physical and emotional conditions, cognitive ability and social interactions. Reported outcomes from passive contact and active participation in gardening experiences at geriatric care facilities include:

- Maintenance of life satisfaction
- Reduced stress
- Providing sensory stimulation
- Improved memory and concentration
- Improved social interaction
- Reduced agitation in residents with Alzheimer's

What horticultural therapy practitioners say:

Due to the nature of gardening, a horticultural therapy program in a long-term care facility can address some of the needs that arise from simply living in an institution. A horticultural therapy program can provide opportunity for:

- *Self expression*: horticulture activities offer excellent outlets for creative expression, for example, designing a flower bed or patio container, flower arranging, or caring for bonsai
- *Variety*: horticulture activities are guided by the seasons, i.e. planting seeds in spring, harvesting produce through the summer, etc.
- *Change*: gardens and plants are always changing, overtime a seed becomes a mature, flowering plant

- *Control and independence*: care for indoor plants, patio plants, and providing resident's their own garden space
- *Social interaction*: horticulture and gardening tend to bring people with a common interest and past experiences together in an enjoyable way
- *Service*: horticulture activities offer many opportunities for service from making and delivering flower arrangements to bed-ridden people or to the dining area to growing and selling plants to raise funds for special projects for the institution
- *Mental stimulation*: for the novice gardener as well as the experienced, horticulture is a stimulating field of study
- *Physical activity*: many of the activities of gardening are moderate-intensity activity

Getting started:

A horticultural therapy program in a long-term care facility can add much to the lives of the residents. In establishing and maintaining a program consider the following:

- Conduct an informal (or formal) feasibility study of the residents to determine their interest and degree to which they feel they would be involved
- If an outside garden is to be implemented
 - The site should receive at least 6 hours of direct sun for vegetables and most flowering plants
 - A source of running water should be nearby
 - Assess the soil and amend if needed
 - The site should be easily accessible by the residents
 - The site should be in view of a high traffic area to remind the residents to visit the garden
 - Shade and seating should be near the garden for passive enjoyment of the garden
- If a patio garden is to be implemented
 - Stained concrete reduces the amount of glare and provides a level surface
 - Shade and seating should be nearby to offer rest, provide a break from the sun, and provide an area for seated activities such as transplanting or just socializing
 - Consider the view from the inside, design the patio garden in such a way to lure people to the outdoors
 - Provide choice by using movable seating
 - The patio can be designed with raised beds of varying heights, table-like raised containers, vertical-frame beds, hanging baskets on pulleys, and containers to provide gardening opportunities for residents of varying abilities
- For indoor gardening
 - Consider tropical plants, many are well suited for the reduced light levels of indoor environments
 - Most plants can be grown under fluorescent bulbs, in a sunny room provide 8 hours of lighting, in a windowless room provide 14 hours of lighting

- Plant selection is important, consider plants for their fragrance, texture, taste, sound, familiarity
- Look to your community for support
 - Contact your local county extension agent for gardening advice
 - Look to your local Master Gardeners, educated through the state extension service, for gardening advice and service
 - Contact your local gardening clubs, most have service as part of their mission, as well as providing gardening advice
 - Contact your local nurseries, garden stores, hardware stores for donation of materials and supplies, including the large chain stores

Resources

American Horticultural Therapy Association, <http://www.ahta.org>, 3570 E. 12th Ave. Suite 206, Denver, CO 80206, 1-800-634-1603

Gardening for Good, <http://www.gardening4good.org/>

Thrive, <http://www.thrive.org.uk/>

Selected Books:

Accessible Gardening: Tool and Techniques for Seniors and the Disabled. Joann Woy, 1997, Stackpole Books, ISBN 0-8117-2652-5

Gardening is for Everyone. Audrey Cloet and Chris Underhill, 1990, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 4 Fitzharding Street, London, ISBN 0-285-64954-X

Gardens in Healthcare Facilities: Uses, Therapeutic Benefits, and Design Recommendations. Clare Cooper Marcus, MA, MCP and Marni Barnes, MLA, LCSW, 1995, University of California at Berkeley. The Center for Health Design, Inc. ISBN 0-9638938-2-3

Growing with Care: Using Greenery, Gardens and Nature with Aging and Special Populations. Betsy Kreidler, 2002, Venture Publishing, ISBN 1-892132-34-6

Horticultural Therapy and the Older Adult Population. Suzanne E. Wells, MS; Ed. with American Horticultural Therapy Association and Friends Organization. 1997, Haworth Press, Inc. ISBN 0-7890-0045-8. [Also published as: *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, Vol. 22, Numbers (1/2)(3) 1997.]

Horticulture as Therapy: Principles and Practice. Sharon P Simson and Martha C. Straus, editors, 1998, Haworth Press, Inc. ISBN 1-56022-859-8