

The Benefits of Therapeutic Gardening

Gardening is perhaps one of the oldest healing arts; yet as a science, it is very new among the therapeutic professions. Humans are physically dependent on plants for food and for much of their shelter, clothing, and energy. We evolved with plants in our environment. It has only been in recent years that we have spent many hours of the day in buildings devoid of plants. It is not unreasonable to theorize that the environment that has had a significant impact on our physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development as a species would be one with which we would continue to respond. David Suzuki notes "Reconnecting our children with nature in their everyday lives is the first step in an environmental education." Horticultural therapy is the means by which we can provide programs that enhance self-esteem and establish a greater quality of life. As the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Bird Feeder programs in Toronto state "Through the metaphor of the garden, we celebrate our interdependence with the natural world as a context for healing our children, our communities, the earth and ourselves" In fact, anecdotal and empirical evidence clearly illustrate that therapeutic gardening has a profound effect on individuals' physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning.

By design therapeutic gardening is filled with challenging yet attainable goals such as: providing intellectual stimulation, improving physical functioning, supplying a release from depression and pain, enhancing emotional well being, fostering a sense of community and providing a venue for creativity and productivity.

According to Charles Lewis of the Morton Arboretum, the plant world is non-threatening and nondiscriminatory. In a study by Rachel Kaplan, a majority of the respondents gave "peacefulness and tranquility" as the most important satisfactions gained from gardening. Ira Stamm and Andy Barber of the Menninger Clinic report a reduction in tension and anxiety in horticultural programs that enhance participants' receptiveness to being approached by another person. Thus, it appears that working in a horticultural setting provides an atmosphere in which it is easier for people to relate to one another.

As a physical activity therapeutic gardening simultaneously deals with aspects of disability itself, the emotional meaning of disability, and the possibility that the consequences of the disability are not inevitably dire may foster integration of mind and body. For example, a teenager who has paraplegia as a result of a car accident thinks of herself as a helpless cripple who "can't even stand up." In the garden program, she learns to stake the plants and comes to see concretely that she can do something useful. In addition, she experiences three things symbolically: she learns that other things need support, she has an interest in supporting a plant--thereby being useful to another living thing, and she (and by implication, others) feels it is genuinely worthwhile to aid in the support of others who literally cannot stand alone.

Creativity is a means of self-expression that is often frustrated among people with disabilities. Horticulture offers the opportunity for many creative experiences, such as flower arranging, landscaping and decorating the garden space to art making from natural materials. On another level, plants also offer a creative experience in life and growth. By making a simple cutting or planting a seed, one creates an entirely new plant. This concept is expressed by Carol Cole, a young heroin addict, writing about her garden as

part of her drug rehabilitation program: "It is especially great when we can just sit and watch it all grow in the warm evening, giving a feeling of having accomplished something good."

When dealing with living, growing plants, things will go wrong despite the best of plans. Disease, insects, and weeds will take their toll and erratic weather will complicate the problem. Learning to cope with inevitable frustrations in gardening may help prepare program participants to deal with other frustrations in everyday life.

From being around plants, from observing their growth, we acquire an understanding of life and the rhythms that maintain it. From plants we derive a sense of "dynamic stability through change." Without continuous change, plants could not survive. A plant must flower in order to set seed; it must go dormant to survive the winter. There is a natural rhythm, a time and a season for all things and nothing can be forced out of its natural order and still survive.

Intellectual Benefits

1. Attainment of new skills. Individuals gain many new abilities as they learn the techniques and methods of horticulture such as plant propagation, gardening, and flower arranging.
2. Improved vocabulary and communication skills. Participants in the program learn new terms as well as new concepts.
3. Aroused sense of curiosity. Plants are fascinating. They arouse many questions. How and why do plants grow the way that they do? They offer opportunities for experimentation.
4. Increased powers of observation. Watching the interaction between plants, humans and animals helps develop deeper understanding and ability to evaluate relationships. This also leads to improved ability to plan and make decisions.
5. Vocational and prevocational training. Many different schools and institutions place participants in horticultural related jobs after completion of their programs.
6. Stimulation of sensory perceptions. Vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell all play an important role in gaining the full benefit from a therapeutic gardening program. At the same time that sensitivity to one's surroundings increases the perception of details increases.

Social Benefits

1. Interaction within the group. The members of a group learn to relate to one another in a more meaningful way as they work together toward a common goal. They learn to respect the rights of others, to be more cooperative, and to share responsibility. They also have an opportunity to develop leadership qualities.
2. Interactions outside of the group. For individuals within an institution as well as disabled members of the community the opportunity to meet with others is an important experience in their social growth. The opportunity to share the products of their own effort with others is also important. The vegetable garden at the Menninger Foundation has traditionally supplied food for several youth homes in Topeka as well as for victims of emergency and disaster. According to Dr. Will Menninger, "as they share the product of

the work with people less fortunate economically, patients picture themselves, often for the first time, as productive members of society."

Emotional Growth

1. Improved confidence and self esteem. Plant materials and activities can be selected that guarantee some degree of success to the participants in the program. Pride in the completed project, a sense of responsibility and accomplishment, all lead to an improved self-concept.
2. Opportunities to relieve aggressive drives in a socially acceptable manner. From the breaking up of old flower pots for use in drainage to constructing wooden raised beds, participants are given many outlets, leading to improved self control through redirection of these aggressive drives.
3. Activities that promote interest and enthusiasm for the future. This is a particularly important aspect to the elderly and the emotionally troubled individuals who have lost interest in the future. Interest can be rekindled as they anticipate a flower bud opening or a seed germinating.
4. Opportunities for the satisfaction of creative drives. Creativity and self expression are evident in many aspects of horticulture. Art making can thrive within the garden.

Physical Benefits

1. Development and improvement of basic motor skills. Specific activities can be used to improve muscle coordination and to train unused muscles, for example, transplanting of seedlings can be used to practice grasp and release and flexion of the thumb and forefinger.
2. Increased outdoor activities. Flower and vegetable gardens as well as landscape maintenance activities provide many opportunities for exposure to sunlight, fresh air, and weather conditions.

It is not necessary to have expensive facilities or a large garden to initiate a successful, therapeutic gardening program. With imagination and initiative even the most limited facilities can be modified to accommodate horticultural activities. If there is no greenhouse available, a sunny window can be used. If there is no window, special lights can be installed for growing plants. If there is no place for a garden, pot plants, dish gardens and terrariums can be used.

The following is a sample list of some of the activities Willow Springs Creative Centre's Therapeutic Gardening Program will offer to participants either in a mobile fashion (we come to you) or at our homebase. All activities can be modified and adapted to accommodate individuals by age or with disabilities (physical, cognitive, emotional or social).

A. Arts and Crafts

1. Indoor crafts

- a. Model gardens
- b. Flowers making using paper, ribbon, cloth, corn husks, seeds, etc.
- c. Collages of pictures from garden catalogs and magazines (wall hangings, trash boxes, supply bins, etc.)
- d. Painting projects such as decorating garden gloves & aprons for yard work, watercolour paintings of flowers and trees
- e. Jewelry making from seeds, cones and dried flowers, stones, shells
- f. Weaving with materials from the garden
- g. Funny figure designs using seed pods, pine cones, apples, squash, pumpkins, potatoes, etc.
- h. Wall plaques such as seed mosaics, seed pod pictures, and dried flower plaques
- i. Stationery and note cards using such techniques as leaf and flower prints, potato block prints and pressed flowers, stenciling
- j. Book markers using pressed flowers, birch bark, paint, etc.
- k. Potpourri made with herbs, flowers, pine needles, cones, etc.
- l. Planters made from willow, tin cans, sand casting, etc.
- m. Paper-mache sculptures, vases, garden spirits, etc.
- n. Plaster, clay and concrete castings of wild flowers, ferns, rhubarb leaves, etc.
- o. Garlands of cones, pods, seeds, herbs, spices, wood, bark, etc.
- p. Drying flowers (air dry, borax and sand, silica gel, glycerin, pressing)
- q. Seasonal projects such as Christmas wreaths and cards, Jack-o-lanterns, Easter bonnets, etc.
- r. Cooking from the garden : salads, pizza, soups, preserves, bread, etc.

2. Outdoor Crafts

- a. Wind chimes from flower pots, willow, copper or bamboo
- b. Mosaic patio stones

- c. Garden sculpture
- d. Garden Furniture
- e. Bird attractors (feeding stations, houses, baths, etc.)
- f. Planters and window boxes from willow, wood, clay, concrete, tiles, etc.
- g. Scarecrows

- h. Faux stained glass windows

- i. Willow arbours, trellises, etc.

B. Group Activities

1. Games (flower quizzes, scavenger hunts, creating a colour wheel)
2. Stories (story telling pictures, myths and legends, pantomime, skits, puppetry)
3. Movies and slide shows (many available through libraries, arboreta, and garden clubs)
4. Celebrations (Summer Solstice, Garden Tea Party, Harvest Dinner, Winter Garden Party)

C. Excursions

1. Conservatory, gardens, and parks
2. Fair Fairs
3. Horticultural businesses (e.g. greenhouses, nurseries, orchards, vegetable producers)
4. Collecting trips (mount and display, save for other crafts); rocks, insects, weeds, wildflowers, cones, tree flowers, seeds and seed pods, mosses and terrarium plants

D. Plants - Indoors

1. Flower arranging, corsage making
2. Dish gardens, terrariums
3. Houseplants: culture, identification, propagation
4. Hydroponics cultures: lettuce, carrot and beet tops, watercress
5. Experiments: lights, temperature, water
6. Flower forcing: bulbs, spring branches
7. Composting
8. Seed sprouting (bean sprouts, alfalfa, mustard seeds)

E. Plants - Outdoors

1. Flower, vegetable or herb garden: e.g. planning and preparing soil, composting, weeding, watering, harvesting, etc.
2. Nursery: propagation, culture, watering, digging
3. Landscape maintenance: e.g. mowing, pruning, edging, weeding, transplanting, etc.

F. Related Fields of Study

1. Insects and diseases
2. Soils
3. Birds and animals in the garden.
4. Garden Artists

