



# 40-Hour Basic Course For Activity Directors

# Horticulture Therapy

Hank Bruce and  
Tomi Folk



# WHAT IS HORTICULTURAL THERAPY?

© Hank Bruce & Tomi Jill Folk

- It is simply using the garden and gardening activities as therapeutic tools. Horticultural therapy can improve the social, educational, psychological and physical adjustment of people. This can nurture the body, mind and spirit while improving the quality of life. It can be active or passive.
- Horticultural therapy has proven to be beneficial for the aging and elderly, those who are physically, mentally, emotionally or sensory challenged, substance abusers, public offenders, at risk children, the socially disadvantaged, victims of abuse, disease, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, cardiac and cancer patients.
- For all of us who suffer the burden of stress from everyday living, those who are family caregivers, those who are undergoing the trauma of life change (death of a loved one, loss of job, divorce, etc.), and those whose work demands too much of them, gardening can be a retreat, a haven, a source of comfort and renewal.
- For people and patients whose physical or mental condition renders them passive and dependent, having living plants to nurture creates a role reversal. Caring for plants, horticultural therapy, puts the individual in a *care giving* role. This can not only bring pleasure, it can build confidence and a sense of purpose. The growth of the plants under one's care gives the gift of hope and a reason to look forward to tomorrow.
- It is often the case that the mentally and physically handicapped and the elderly suffer from low self esteem and depression. Working with plants gives them a chance to be successful, to feel that they too have value. Horticultural therapy can also provide social interaction, topics for conversation, learning opportunities and valuable exercise at a self directed pace.
- The physical activity of horticultural therapy helps patients who have undergone surgery or treatments heal better, lowers blood pressure and stimulates the senses. Today many hospitals have garden courtyards where patients and families can stroll or sit and reflect in the midst of beautiful flowers and foliage, sharing the life giving rays of the sun, breathing the oxygen enriched air and enjoying the companionship of green friends.
- Horticultural therapy programs have proven beneficial in senior care communities, assisted living facilities, schools, substance abuse centers, prisons and juvenile detention centers, senior citizen's centers and homeless shelters. Health care organizations, hospice programs, social service organizations, welfare agencies, churches schools and many others have been able to improve the quality of life for those in their care through the use of gardening as therapy.



*The garden is a safe place, a benevolent setting where everyone is welcome. Plants are non-judgmental, non-threatening and non-discriminating. They respond to the care given. It doesn't matter whether one is black or white, been to kindergarten or college, is poor or wealthy, healthy or ill, been a victim of abuse or an abuser, is handicapped or blind, can call a plant by name or only caress the leaves with arthritic hands (adapted from *Green Nature, Human Nature* written by Charles Lewis).*



### **A HARVEST OF BENEFITS FROM HORTICULTURAL THERAPY**

**Cognitive development:** growing and working with plants, either indoors or out, teaches new skills and language, increases attention spans, raises concentration levels, improves the ability to work independently, develops problem solving skills and the ability to follow directions.

**Social growth:** working as a part of a group encourages learning to compromise, share and work toward common goals, increases social interaction, provides opportunities for improving communication skills and heightens an awareness of the natural world.

**Psychological development:** A feeling of usefulness, a sense of responsibility, improved self-esteem and a sense of worth grow along with the plants. Both the opportunity to be creative and the potential for success are present. The acts of weeding, cultivating and pruning relieve, in a socially acceptable way, feelings of tension, anger, aggression and stress.

**Physical rehabilitation:** The activities of gardening can be adapted to an individual's limitations. Being actively involved with plants and gardening can lower blood pressure, improve circulation and respiration and exercise arthritic joints. Gardening activities provide meaningful exercise for stroke patients, those recovering from surgery, illness or accidents and particularly, those of us with arthritis.

**Spiritually:** being with plants provided a sense of place in the universe, communion with nature and a sense of peace and harmony. Too often we think that we must be engaged in "activities," but sometimes "being" is activity enough. Sometimes opening the soul to the diversity of beauty is activity enough. To feel the leaves or smell the flowers can be an inspirational experience.

### **PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL THERAPISTS**

Professional horticultural therapists are specially educated and trained members of a team that may include doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, teachers and behavioral specialists. There are programs designed for virtually every special population and all individuals who would like to reap the rewards of gardening as therapy. These professionals can set up programs for institutions, schools, hospitals, organizations, nursing homes and facilities.

## **Primary resources for more information and classes:**

(All of these also have Facebook pages)

**[www.ahta.org](http://www.ahta.org)** The American Horticultural Therapy Association web site

**<https://www.thrive.org.uk/>** Thrive, in the UK offering is the best overall resource. They offer a multitude of classes (many free), information and model programs.

**<https://www.mahtn.org/>** Mid-Atlantic Horticultural Therapy Network

**<http://www.htinstitute.org>** Horticultural Therapy Institute



## **Petals & Pages**

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# **Horticulture Therapy:**

## **IT'S ABOUT THE PEOPLE, NOT THE PLANTS!**

*The garden is a safe place, a benevolent setting where everyone is welcome. Plants are nonjudgmental, nonthreatening and nondiscriminating. They respond to the care given. It doesn't matter whether one is black or white, been to kindergarten or college, is poor or wealthy, healthy or ill, been a victim of abuse or an abuser, is disabled or blind, can call a plant by name or only caresses the leaves with arthritic hands. (Adapted from *Green Nature, Human Nature* by Charles Lewis).*

## **A few horticultural therapy topics we will discuss**

### **1. Gardening and being with plants or using plant materials as a therapeutic tool.**

It's more than just a feel good exercise. It's a form of contact with nature in an accessible and convenient, sometimes clinical setting. The first recorded HT programs were way back in the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and recognized as the "Father of American Psychiatry" was the first to document the positive influence working in the garden had on individuals with mental illness in the United States. His first work was with veterans of the Revolutionary War. His farm is still being used as a therapeutic healing place today.

### **2. Seniors Gardening for Health, Gardening as Therapy**

Therapy for the body  
Therapy for the mind and spirit  
Therapy for the family and community

### **3. Ten reasons for gardening, indoors and out**

Empowerment  
Physical exercise  
Mental stimulation  
Stress reduction  
Sensory experiences  
Socialization, communication  
Spiritual connection, our place in the universe  
Cultivating sense of humor  
Inspiring CREATIVITY  
Improving QUALITY OF LIFE



#### **4. Cultivating Smiles in the Garden**

Whimsy and the sense of humor  
Celebrating our sense of wonder

#### **5. Games Gardeners Play, “There’s more to life than Bingo.”**

From Tic Tac Toe to miniature golf  
Bolo Toss, quizzes, treasure hunts and a few more

#### **6. Alzheimer’s with a Green Thumb**

When we can no longer get our hands dirty  
Sensory roundtables  
Possibilities and precautions

#### **7. Empowerment and Creativity**

Preparation of site and containers  
Propagation, nurturing plants, and activities with what is being grown  
From pressed flowers and leaves to tomato pies and gourd dolls, puppets and musical instruments  
When the seniors designed a community garden  
Preserving history, saving endangered species a book titled “Making Do & Putting By.”

#### **8. Making the garden accessible for Senior Gardeners**

What limitations feel like, the Senior’s training program for the HT interns  
Accessible gardens, conversation stations  
Thinking vertical

#### **9. Designing and Implementing a Therapeutic Gardening Program**

Indoors and out  
Why so many therapeutic gardening programs fail  
Plan for four seasons of the people-plant connection, gourds, dried flowers, theme gardens and non-plant activities and games gardeners play  
More than planting seeds & watering plants. Stories, Quizzes, games and conversation

#### **10. Safe Plants and Dangerous Plants**

**The following are other resources you might find valuable**

**AHTA**, American Horticultural Therapy Association

**Thrive** a premier site in the UK. They offer numerous classes (most free) and a neverending list of articles.



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# **The 4 Keys to a Successful Therapeutic Gardening Program**

*excerpted from Gardens for the Senses, Gardening as Therapy revised and expanded edition*

So often the people involved in therapeutic gardening programs focus more on the plants and activities than the people. The following four basic keys are all important and all are about empowering and giving permission to envision something new. What too often happens is that the participants are left out of the decision making process. They are dis-empowered. Then when they drop out of the group we blame them. These four keys all provide opportunities to engage, and succeed, or fail.

### **1. It's about the people, not the plants**

Frequently we become so concerned for the health and safety of the plants that we lose sight of the fact that these programs exist for the benefit of the people. We need to encourage the elders to handle the plants, even if a leaf is damaged or a bud is lost. We need to use safe pest controls to protect sensitive people, and fertilizers that are not toxic to frail elders, cancer patients and those recovering from illness or surgery.

### **2. Listen**

Too often we assume the role of lecturer and do all the talking. This is not only boring, it's an insult to an elder who has spent a lifetime acquiring wisdom. When we *discuss with* rather than *talk to*, everyone gains.

### **3. Let go**

It follows that if we are willing to let someone else speak, we also have the opportunity to surrender control of every moment. It is empowering when we step back and let things happen. Sometimes mistakes occur, but these too are learning moments. The important lesson for us is that there is usually more than one right way to do almost everything.

### **4. Laugh**

A smile is good medicine and laughter is GREAT MEDICINE, particularly when it's shared. It has a positive affect on the chemicals in our brains, serves as a mental stimulant and improves our overall attitude. Laughter is best when shared. It can reduce depression, loneliness, shyness, insecurity, and anger. Laughter can also open the garden gate to creative expression.

**Remember: There's a vast difference between DOING WITH and DOING FOR  
and  
a CONVERSATION is better than a LECTURE**



# Cultivating Smiles in the Garden, Whimsy and the Sense of Humor

Tomi Jill Folk & Hank Bruce

**"Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy." —Thich Nhat Hanh**

Whimsy and non-plant materials have a place in your stroll, paradise, healing and sensory gardens. This includes whimsical plants, planters and non-plant materials. The garden can be a place of discovery, surprises and humor. These elements make us smile, and this is a positive contagion. They also create a need within us to share both the smile and the reason we are smiling. The effect on the brain can be literally life saving. - the feel good party, the activation of the imagination and our creativity. It's ok to share both the surprise and the laughter.

**A smile is good medicine**, particularly when it's shared. A smile puts us at ease, tells us we are safe and those around us that we mean no harm. This creates a comfort zone that makes friendly interaction and communication possible. It has a positive effect on the chemicals in our brains, serves as a mental stimulant and improves our overall attitude. It can reduce depression, loneliness, shyness, insecurity, fear and anger. It can even inspire the imagination and spark creativity. We can literally grow smiles in the garden.

Physical benefits of exercising our sense of humor happen when our stress level is lowered. Blood pressure can drop and heart rate become more regular. Our digestion improves we are able to be calm, mentally focused and physically engaged. Another factor that is so often overlooked is that smiling improves our appearance. One of our activity director friends actually used mirrors to prove this to her clients. She placed mirrors near whimsical elements in her sensory garden to display the smiles that happened when they were discovered. Communication becomes easier as we are able to be both relaxed and amused. A simple smile is contagious.

The following explores ways whimsy can be a part of our residents or clients garden experience. Whimsy can be a part of both active and passive time spent in the company of plants, in the garden or on a windowsill.

The dictionary defines whimsy as - unusual, funny, and pleasant ideas or qualities. It is also an art form a step or two beyond the expected. This whimsy is what makes us smile and activates our sense of humor.

A rubber duck swimming in the water fountain is whimsy. A blue teddy bear taking time to smell the roses on the trellis is whimsy. A statuary turtle sitting beside a "Turtle Crossing" sign is whimsy. Touching the leaves of the delightful sensitive plant *Mimosa pudica*, a plant who shyly folds her leaves at the slightest contact, is literally whimsy in motion.

**Whimsy is the unexpected**, the lighthearted, the stuff of life that makes us smile, chuckle or laugh out loud. It's the use of thrift store items, like using old shoes as unconventional containers for your plants. It's the crafty use of beads or seeds, stamps or coins, clippings from comic books, or junk drawer treasures as the decor of your chosen botanical friend's residence. It's the wild and weird items we use as garden statuary, even when the garden is only potted plants on the windowsill and the statuary is a rock, plastic Halloween insects or clay frogs and snails. It's an Easter Bunny sitting in the middle of your windowsill salad garden. The elements of whimsy are yours to choose and use. It can also be the domain of all ages, including those with dementia, mental illness, physical challenges and difficulty expressing themselves.

**Begin the day with a surprise.** We encourage starting the day looking for the surprise. It may be in the form of seeds sprouting, a new flower opening, a visit from a hummingbird or butterfly, perhaps the chirp of a songbird as it feeds it's newly hatched young in the birdhouse clients made from a gourds grown last summer, or it might be it the unexpected sight of shadows of a tree's leaves dancing on the sidewalk below. You may need to look no farther than the African violet on the windowsill, or the kitten's delight when you give it a sprig of fresh catnip.

**Whimsy is our imagination and creative energy at work.** Or, perhaps it's the liberation of a part of ourselves that has been held in check for too long. However you chose to view this lighthearted element of whimsy, it is the incongruous, the joke that is planted in the garden to make others smile too. This whimsy is the message that it's safe to relax, share thoughts and fire up the imagination. It's also the way we communicate to ourselves and others that life is far too serious and we all need to lighten up. And the garden, even the windowsill garden, is a great place to grow smiles. It's the whimsy that lets us open up, engage in conversation with others and face the day ourselves.

**Don't be shy about using whimsy.** This is your opportunity to experiment, to try things, to engage in the most important aspect of being crafty or artistic. Every smile, yours, or that smile adorning friends or strangers, is a work of art. If you provided the inspiration for that smile, then you are truly an artist. If you are willing to use the garden as a place to play, rather than work, you possess a wisdom of great value. This is where you are free to be the real you, not what is expected by others, or constrained by stress, fear of failure, or need to be serious.

### **Celebrating our sense of wonder**

The never ending parade of discoveries is one of the great adventures for the gardener and all those visiting the garden. The surprise that lies in wait for us around the bend in the garden path is the whimsy, the punch line, the reason so many gardeners are able to smile at themselves and the world. Because a garden, even a windowsill garden, is filled with life, there will always be something new, changes expected and unexpected, good news and bad. Too much of our time is spent in the garden looking for the work to be done when we should be discovering the surprises and experiencing the wonder of it all.

When we can begin the day looking for the surprise and the rest of the day goes much better. This discovery might be as awesome as a flower bursting into bloom with an explosion of color, or

something as inspirational as a seed sprouting with new life. If we are willing to unleash our sense of beauty we can find art in the journey of a fallen leaf driven by the breeze on the other side of the window, or the dramatic technicolor visit of a passing butterfly.

These discoveries can come with the aid of a magnifying glass looking at the architecture of an African violet flower, or binoculars to bring us the joy of birds in the trees. It may be in the texture of a sage leaf or a palm frond, the scent of a chocolate mint or the pungent aroma of a Swedish ivy. Sometimes the same discovery can be made day after day with subtle variations on a theme, as the fruit of the tomato ripens, the sprout grows, the cutting forms new leaves, as sunlit mornings and cloudy afternoons change the colors, your mood and different thoughts form in the mind.

It can be a totally new surprise when yesterday's discovery is shared with today's friend. When you experience the surprise with your senses it is added to the essence of you. When it is mentioned in a letter or an e-mail, or recorded in a photograph, a sketch or a poem it becomes a part of the expression of you. How can we not seek these surprises, and the joy they bring?

**Whimsy, smiles and laughter** are also a part of the well planned garden for the individuals with Alzheimer's and their family or professional caregivers. Wonderful things happen to the brain and the body when we laugh. And it's even better if it's an experience shared. Whimsy is the surprise, and it may be as unplanned as a hummingbird visiting a feeder, or it may be a piece of statuary, a "blowing bubbles" session under a shade tree, or a series of Burma Shave type signs along the path. Planning and placing whimsy in the back yard can be fun for individuals with memory loss and their family members. In senior care programs both the staff and the clients can relax and laugh. There's a lot to be said for going barefoot on the grass whether it's a child's brand new experience or a senior citizen's distant childhood memory.

### Creating whimsy

We can easily include the whimsy in any garden. "Your vegetables will grow better when you are smiling. Rocks painted like ladybugs and honey bees can make you more relaxed and make interaction with both the plants and other people easier and more enjoyable." one of my students explained as she demonstrated the rock bugs her rehab center patients had created for their healing garden. The following are just a few examples of whimsy that have been used. Be creative yourself, and even more important, encourage your clients, students or patients to exercise their imaginations.

1. Gourds with painted faces smiling from a flower bed or hanging out in the gazebo or in the grape arbor.
2. Treasure hunts can be fun for both individuals and teams.
3. Pine cones painted bright colors hiding like Easter eggs can brighten any season.
4. A plastic owl used to scare garden pests sitting on a lawn chair or picnic table can be both a surprise and a conversation starter.
5. A colorful teddy bear or other plush or plastic animal can be a surprise and generate a comfortable

smile. One activity director placed a plastic frog somewhere in the stroll garden and the residents began their day looking for that frog. It might be in the vegetables with a little toy hoe, or riding a toy boat in the fountain, or looking at a bird's nest in the tree through binoculars.

6. Creating planters from found containers can be fun and several senior centers offered these one of a kind planters in their gift shop.

7. Growing unusual flowers and vegetables can be long term fun. Cotton plants blooming and producing cotton bolls, growing flowers for dried flower arrangements, and you and your clients can make more discoveries.

8. Plants that interact are living smile producers. The sensitive plant, *Mimosa pudica*, and the touch-me-not, (jewel weed) *Impatiens capensis* are both safe and easy to grow from seed. The popular Venus fly trap, *Dionaea muscipula* is carnivorous and people of all ages enjoy feeding this bug eating plant.

9. Outdoor planters made from old tires that clients have painted bright colors can become whimsical homes for a wide range of plants while old gutters secured to an upright frame or a wall can be an easily accessible planter for strawberries, lettuce, and flowers like marigolds, portulaca, and other compact growing plants your residents/clients may suggest.

10. Signs on the light side can be created by the activity staff or the clients. These can have painted images, attached plastic butterflies or other creepy crawlies, lines from poetry, even plant names in different languages.

Unleash the imagination and see what can happen. Let us know what whimsy you and your clients create.

# Creative Experiences Can Be Empowering

adapted from Creative Forecasting article by Tomi Jill Folk & Hank Bruce

We often overlook the potential for creative expression that can be found in the companionship of plants. The garden itself is an art form. Even a mundane clay pot can be customized to display a sense of beauty, or a sense of humor. We can spend a rainy day painting plain clay pots. From beads and lace to painted happy faces or fanciful creatures, creative energy dwells in the minds of residents and clients. All we have to do is set it free. Creativity knows no season, and horticultural therapy doesn't have to take place outdoors in the garden.

Recent research involving seniors with Alzheimer's found that while the memory may fail and recall might be inaccurate, the imagination and creativity often remain, waiting for the opportunity to be engaged.

Some of the research sessions used pictures or photos, but some of the most effective were those that employed the sensory stimulation of botanical familiars. This is a plant, part of a plant or a product derived from plants that are universally familiar. A small group of three to five seemed to work best. A small group can gather around a table where they can hold, feel, smell and visually examine a pine cone, ripe tomato, piece of apple pie or other familiar object. Questions might be asked or conversation encouraged. It's vital that this interaction not become a "class" or include anything remotely resembling a test. Responses need not be accurate, or logical. Creativity in this sense is a freedom of expression and correcting or criticizing an individual can seriously inhibit involvement. It's simply not a part of the process and isn't needed. Therapeutic gardening deals with the very essence of life, and the energy of being alive. This experience begins to lack the natural spontaneity the people-plant connection can generate when we derail the creative energy. Just relax and enjoy this free form theater of the mind.

When our focus is on the plants, we sometimes lose sight of the real goal. *It's about the people, not the plants!* It's also important to note that when we focus on the people, we too frequently concentrate on their limitations, our expectations or specific achievement of goals. The people-plant connection is instinctive and mentally stimulating, if we are relaxed enough to step back and let it happen. This freedom to be creative is empowering.

We possess within us the tools necessary to be creative. What we need is the opportunity and the freedom to use them. It's important to keep in mind that each individual comes equipped with a unique set of experiences, and a viewpoint from a different perspective than yours or mine. They may have a different way of functioning both physically and mentally as well as different ways of expressing themselves. We also carry with us our own negative baggage including inhibitions, fears, insecurities, damaged self-images and wounded self-confidence. We all need to LIGHTEN UP. Then we can help each other relax and inspire originality in each other. Creative energy flows best when we are smiling, comfortable with ourselves and in an environment that stimulates our senses. Isn't this what the garden gives us?

The following are a few examples we have encountered in our time spent with in the garden with a lot of different folks.

### **Victory Gardens and Recycled Kitty Litter Buckets**

The WWII veterans residing at the Westminster Care Center received an invitation from the local high school to speak to their history class about the war and home life. This led to repeat appearances and soon the kids were visiting these vets and began helping build a victory garden. As they were growing the vegetables, other residents began talking about the Great depression and how their families survived. After school was out for the summer, the partnership continued as the kids learned from the old folks about how they survived the hard times of depression and war. This resulted in a book they titled "Making Do and Putting By." Excerpts were printed in the local newspaper. These projects were conceived by the residents and they enjoyed their creativity as well as the opportunity to do some good.

Cornucopia Adult & Family Services decided to create a sensory garden, but they were working with a limited budget. First they decided to paint some old tires bright colors and create a tire garden that was planted in iris and daylilies donated by the surrounding community. Because many of those attending this adult day care had limited mobility they began looking for ways to make the garden accessible. Second hand gutters were painted then attached to wooden frames where they were planted with a succession of portulaca, marigolds and strawberries. This adult day care has several cats in residence. When one of the clients was trying to think of a way to make larger plants accessible, he spotted the kitty litter buckets sitting beside the recycled trash bin. Along with some friends he painted these buckets bright colors and holes were drilled in the bottom. They planted their bucket gardens with tomatoes, peppers, geraniums and other seasonal flowers. These were hung at convenient wheelchair height. The clients enjoyed showing off their recycled artistic planters.

Sometimes accidents happen. The Lighthouse was an adult day care specifically for those dealing with various stages of Alzheimer's. One of the clients carried her best friend with her everywhere she went. This was a plush Waldo of Where's Waldo fame. The Lighthouse has a stroll garden where the clients spent a good deal of time. One afternoon Waldo was accidentally left somewhere in the garden. This was a crisis. Everyone joined in the search. There was laughter and unending chatter when he was found. But during the next few days, the activity professional there began placing a second Waldo in the garden. Then someone brought another one. By the end of the week there were Waldos waiting to be found all over the garden. During the search these clients made other discoveries including sensory moments like the sighting of a hummingbird, butterflies, maple seeds parachuting to the ground, a lizard and the chocolate mint planted along the path. But, always, finding Waldo made the day for everyone.

Spring was approaching for the folks at the Buena Vista Senior Living Community and most of the conversations going on in the diningroom focused on planning this year's garden. Joel was one of the newer residents. He called himself a refugee from the bean fields of the Salinas Valley of New Mexico. He was persuasive and got permission to plant as many pinto beans as he wanted on the South side of the garden.

He planted ten pounds of pintos. They grew fast and when it was time for the harvest, Joel and his fellow gardeners harvested bushels of beans. Some went to the kitchen and some went to the local food bank. Now the quandary was, what to do with five gallon bucket of beans still remaining. Carrie was the activity director, and she knew just what to do. She placed the bucket on the table



and dumped some out so everyone could hold some in their hands. Norma pulled a colorful bandana from her purse and folded it until it formed a pocket. Without a word she filled this pocket with beans. Then she looked toward Carrie, "Ya got some super glue?" Vera suggested they could use old socks and paint eyes and noses on them to make bean kitties. By the end of the week everyone had created at least one beanbag and Joel had rounded up a couple more 5 gallon buckets. Before that day was over Beanbag Basket Ball was the favorite sport, and it was one they played indoors and out.

We shared this idea the elders at a Navajo senior center where we were working with them to design a healthy heart program. They had taken a meandering path between the school and their senior center and turned it into their Happy Heart Path. This was slightly more than a quarter mile in length. Along the way these senior citizens decided where they wanted shade and benches where they could rest, chat and share stories with the kids. They planted native plants, shrubs and a few trees along the way. They also created a series of exercise stations where they could stop and enjoy the swing, seesaw and do various exercises. Almost all of this was their ideas. This means they had ownership and were totally committed. We might have done some things differently, but this was their Happy Heart Path not ours. Incidentally, this was a rather one sided experience. We learned far more from them that they learned from us.

Somewhere along the way several of the residents of the Delany St. Senior Center decided they wanted to convert the drab courtyard into a miniature gold course. It became a reality after they assured the manager that staff could join in their golf games. Other places staged rubber ducky races, treasure hunts, puppet shows with puppets they made form gourds they had grown. One of our favorites is the following.

### **The Autumn Lane Game**

One Wednesday afternoon Courtney decided she'd had enough Bingo. She grabbed a canvas shopping bag and a pair of scissors and waltzed out the door. In about an hour she returned and headed straight to the dining room.

She spread her bag filled with found treasures on the table by the window. Using empty jars, coffee mugs and anything else that would hold water, she soon had a display that was somewhere between clutter and art. Her collection of flowers, leaves and other assorted finds covered one table and half of another. She took the old "Game of Life" board from the closet and used it as a pattern as she turned the paper table cloth into a huge game board with a winding path. Next, she placed her harvest of treasures along the way.

Then she made up the scorecard with the names of each flower, leaf or other treasure she had found. You had to roll the dice and move around the curving pathway. When you landed on one of these autumn treasures, you could check it off your card. The first one to complete the card was the winner. She was delighted with her creation and was firmly convinced this was far better than Bingo.

These are some of the treasures she placed on the game board. She named her new invention "The Autumn Lane Game."

Goldenrod

Milkweed pods

Acorns

Fall asters

Sugar maple leaves

White oak leaves

A green and yellow gourd

Zinnias

Marigolds

A large sunflower

Plume of Pampas grass

Her Autumn Lane Game became so popular that others left the Bingo game to share the laughter and animated conversation that was happening at Courtney's table. This can be done for other seasons as well.

If your residents and/or clients have had creative plant or garden moments we would enjoy hearing about them. If you would like to have more details on any of the activities mentioned above contact us. Thank you.



# When the Seniors Designed a Community Garden

Hank Bruce & Tomi Jill Folk  
Sharing the Stories Project

*The child within me,  
with unfettered joy climbed the tree.  
When no one was looking,  
When not a soul was there to see.  
I carved an elderberry flute,  
and down along the garden walk,  
I accompanied the songbirds as they sang  
'round the lily's stalk.  
This is my special secret garden, my refuge,  
that calm and peaceful place  
where I yet can balance sunbeams on my nose  
And splash dewdrops on my face.*

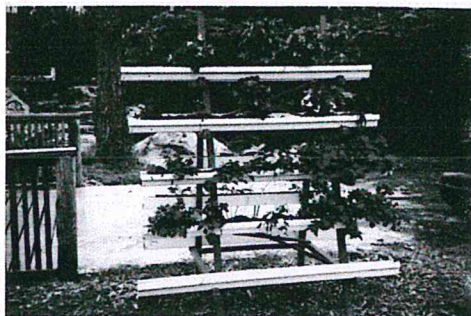
Recently, a group of residents in a senior care center in New Mexico decided to create a small "community garden." After listening patiently to the "experts" they decided to do it their way. Rather than a chain link fence with razor wire to keep out the riff-raff, they decided that a modest white picket fence with hollyhocks behind it would be more inviting. "After all, it's a community garden. That means everyone is welcome, don't it?" one of the elderly ladies commented.

Rather than a gate complete with a chain and padlock, they chose to enter their garden through a large arbor planted with trumpet vines to attract the hummingbirds. They invited the high school shop class to help build raised beds and table gardens. Then they asked the kindergarten class to paint these special gardens and put their hand prints, in bright colors, all over these gardens, "just for smiles."

They held a garden party pot luck, and invited the entire town to be a part of the feast and the planting. This planting also included dwarf fruit trees and a wall of sunflowers and morning glories.

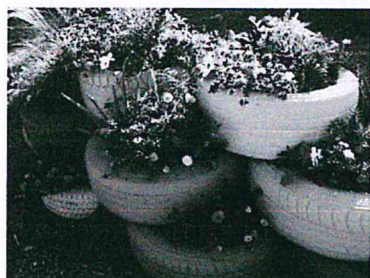
Several retired farmers insisted on using a second-hand stock tank complete with a fountain, cattails, water lilies and goldfish. “Them goldfish is just a poor man’s Koi, don’t ya know.” Lawn chairs were arranged around this “fish pond” and the fellas would sit and visit as they tried their luck with a rod and reel.

A visitor expressed shock at them fishing for those poor pet goldfish. They laughed and explained that they weren’t using hooks, only pieces of zucchini. “Ma’am, we ain’t fishing for ‘em. We’re feedin’ ‘em,” one gentleman told her.



Their garden was accessible, contained old-fashioned plants, whimsy and a few new ideas. About a dozen old gutters painted in a variety of bright colors were nailed to the wall. These were planted with pansies and strawberries.

Each resident planted an old shoe or boot with plants of their choice and had them sitting among the roses and vegetables.



They tried a lot of fun stuff in their community garden. A couple of the gentlemen teamed up with some Boy Scouts to round up some used tires. These they painted bright colors and grouped together to make unique planters. They even created a special garden for the butterflies.

This may well be a model for community gardens of the future. It’s community inclusive rather than excluding most of the neighbors.

Events including live music, multi generational story telling sessions, puppet shows and garden parties make this “old folks home garden” a destination for the whole community. And, this can be done anywhere a diverse community is willing to seize the opportunity. But, remember, the most important thing you can bring into the garden is your sense of humor.

## Sensory research, senior style

We had noticed that most of our horticultural therapy program students and interns were young and had no understanding of how the body changes as we age. This sometimes made them impatient with “the old folks” we worked with. One common complaint from the seniors was, “These college students get awful impatient when we can’t keep up with them as they hurry through the garden.” Another explained “I fell guilty when I have to ask them to speak up or repeat what they said, so I just miss a lot of what’s going.”

In one program we asked a group of seniors to help us develop a series of experiences for our unfortunate students and interns. These old folks were far more ingenious than we were at challenging these students. Some parts of their “How to be a senior citizen” training were downright diabolical.

At the LakeView Senior Center this group marked a walkway with adhesive foot prints spaced far enough apart to make it comfortable to step on each footprint as we followed the path. Then they gave the students and me a pair of cheap binoculars and told us to step on each footprint while looking through the binoculars, first the right way, then through the wrong end. Try it and be prepared to laugh at yourself. Their point was that depth perception can vary greatly as our eyes age.

**Hearing** also changes as we grow older. The range of tones and pitches we can hear may become limited so that some of the words spoken are simply not heard at all, or musical elements are lost. Sounds can run together so that we hear a jumble of tones and spoken words are misunderstood.. Sometimes a hearing aid can help. But often it will enhance the jumble of sounds while providing little clarity.

The LakeView team conducted another experiment for us. They wanted us to know how hearing can be affected by ambient noise. First they recorded and played the sounds of an average mealtime in the dining room. Then they played those sounds while talking to the interns across a dinner table. Much of what was said during this experiment was not heard correctly by these students and their recall was very limited.

When these experts at being old explained, “When you add multi-sensory elements, even with the distracting noises, recall was greatly improved when they could see, touch and inhale the fragrances of leaves, colors of the flowers, even the shape of seeds for the plants we were discussing everyone’s understanding and later recall increased.

**Touch** can be a very deceptive sense to work with. We understand that often the sense of touch diminishes in the fingertips. Hands and feet can become numb. Our fingers may become uncooperative, making it difficult to pick up or hold onto plants, tools, etc. To show our students what this was like the Lakeview team asked them to put on a pair of cotton work gloves then try to sort corn, bean and tomato seeds. Then it got worse. They had to actually pick up and plant these seeds while still wearing the gloves.

But there is another dimension to our sense of touch. As one of the seniors explained it, “You think feeling becomes limited with age, but sometimes our sense of feeling is more intense.” she went on to describe the pain she felt when simply walking across the parking lot. “Put a handful of dry beans in your shoes and walk from the dining room to the lobby.” We did, and she was absolutely right. They also pointed out that when your mind is dealing with something painful, it can’t be bothered with what someone else is saying. You complain that we are grumpy when the fact is we’re hurting.

One of the factors that is often overlooked is that, for many seniors, the sense of touch can become acute enough that touch can be uncomfortable, even painful. This not only involves being

touched by someone else, but can involve grasping or supporting yourself on crutches or a cane. Even holding a hand tool or wearing certain clothing can be uncomfortable.

**Taste** is a sense that is linked to our nose and the eyes, and sometimes even the fingers get involved. We think we are tasting with our tongue but the truth again is that tasting is a multi-sensory experience. We have done the traditional slice of apple and slice of onion test with blindfolded students. You can try this at home and most people will be unable to tell the difference between the apple and the onion if they don't inhale. As we age the sense of taste can change. Often there are flavors that are no longer distinguishable. The assumption is that elders eat less because the food doesn't taste as good to them. Sometimes the great chefs in the nursing home kitchen are blamed. Now, in all fairness, sometimes, it is their fault, but often our diminished sense of taste is to blame.

The LakeView team struck again, this time with herbs. They blindfolded us, then gave us the noontime offering of a baked potato and micro-salad as it is usually served. Then they added fresh herbs from their "culinary garden." They spoon fed us food so we couldn't see what they were putting in our mouths. What really made us all apprehensive was the non-stop laughter as they served each bite. It's amazing how ominous laughter can sound. They added no salt, only in sequence rosemary, dill, parsley, fennel and basil. Each bite became an adventure in dining.

Sometimes the loss of appetite can be due to medications, more often it is due simply to changes in metabolism as we age, or a decrease in physical exertion. The food may not taste as good as it once did because our senses do change. One factor that we have seen over and over again is that when seniors are actively involved in growing vegetables and are engaged in preparing the meals, serving and even clean up, the appetite improves.

One of the greatest factors in decreased appetite is that we don't enjoy dining alone. We are social by nature and human contact at meal time makes the food taste better. So does physical exercise, even if it is minimal. Mental exercise can also have an influence on our eating habits.

**Heat & Cold** - The ability to feel temperature extremes can vary greatly due to the medications one is taking. Neuropathy, decreasing circulation, changes in the nervous system, diabetes, respiratory conditions and heart disease can also be a factor. When we are gardening outdoors it's important to avoid exposing seniors to excessive heat. Even when we are properly hydrated heat can cause cardiac, respiratory and circulatory problems.

These are just some of the ways we change as we age. It isn't always easy to accept these changes. Arthritis and hearing loss are daily reminders that Father Time and Mother Nature are not always benevolent. As a member of the Lakeview team explained it, "The problem is, none of us has ever been this old before. Every one of us is an amateur at this aging thing. We don't know what to expect, or even how we are supposed to behave. Why don't they have classes to teach us what to expect?"

## Making the Tools Easier to Use

Today there are a number of tools manufactured for those of us who have traded the vigor of youth for the wisdom of years. This may include limited mobility, declining strength or difficulty gripping properly with arthritic hands. Fiskars manufactures a series of pruning shears with a gear mechanism that reduces the amount of effort required. Earth Budeez produces trowels, cultivators and other tools that use total arm and shoulder rather than the wrist.

There are easy to use gripping tools, rakes and shovels with lightweight or telescoping handles that make it easy to use them from a wheelchair or with physical limitations. There are even rolling benches so that one doesn't need to get down on hands and knees. But we don't need to be limited by the marketplace.

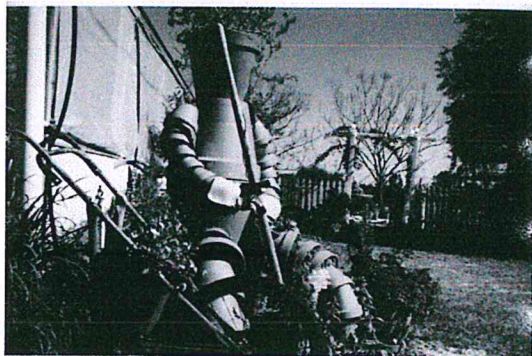
There's a multitude of ways we can modify tools to open the doors of opportunity for those of us who find holding a trowel or pair of pruning shears a challenge. We can create our own tools with extension handles, padded grips, Velcro straps and more. The following are a few ways tools can be adapted to make gardening easier for seniors.

1. Lightweight tools are easier to handle. Using tools that are too heavy or awkward can cause pain, inflammation and injuries, to both the gardener and the garden.
2. A pick up tool, like the Grabber is invaluable. It can be used for maintenance in the garden or to assist in pruning, weeding, harvesting and basic maintenance.
3. It's unfortunate that most manufacturers produce tools in green or black. These colors are the colors of the plants and soil making them tools easy to misplace or lose. You can use brightly colored paint or fluorescent tape on the tool handles to prevent losing them.
4. Often the handles are difficult to grip with arthritic hands but craft foam or pipe insulation wrapped around the tool handles can make them much easier to use.
5. When it's difficult to grasp, we can put Velcro strips on a pair of garden gloves then put matching strips on the tools. This can help us hold onto the tools and make the work much easier.
6. A mirror glued to a golf club permits easy viewing under leaves. This helps us to spot bugs, slugs, fruit and even snakes.
7. A walker can be converted into a tool cart by attaching a wire basket. One of our senior gardeners used a series of coffee cans to hold tools, gloves, seeds, a water bottle and other accessories she used as she gardened.
8. We don't often think of a magnifying glass as a garden tool, but it can help you to find and identify insects and other critters hiding on your plants and under the leaves.
9. Today everyone has a cell phone and most of them are also cameras. This means that every gardener has the opportunity to record the surprises the garden has to offer from the flower buds

opening to a butterfly stopping by for a visit.

10. To make planting seeds easier, a plastic funnel taped to a section of ½ inch plastic pipe makes a great planting tube to reach the ground from a wheelchair.

Now it's your turn to devise convenient tools that can make gardening easier and more enjoyable for mature gardeners.



## The Whimsy is Up to You

Whimsy is the unexpected, the lighthearted, the stuff of life that makes us smile, chuckle or laugh out loud. It's the use of thrift store items, like old shoes as unconventional containers for your plants. It's the creative use of beads or seeds, stamps or coins, clippings from comic books or junk drawer treasures as the decor of your chosen botanical friend's residence. It's the wild and weird items we use as

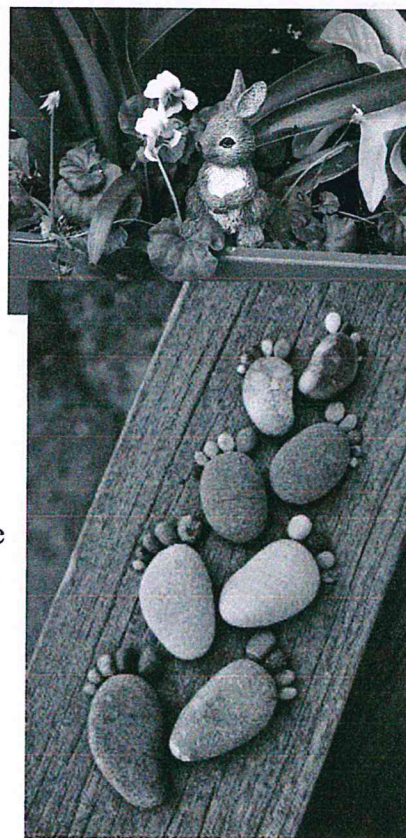
garden statuary, even when the garden is only a potted plant on the windowsill and the statuary is a rock, plastic Halloween insects or clay frogs and snails. It's an Easter Bunny sitting in the middle of your windowsill salad garden. The elements of whimsy are yours to choose and use.

Whimsy is your imagination, your creative energy at work. Or, perhaps it's the demented part of ourselves that has been held in check for too long. However you chose to view this element of whimsy, it is the incongruous, the joke that is planted in the garden to make others smile. The whimsy is the message that it's safe to relax, share thoughts and fire up the imagination. It is also the way we communicate with ourselves and others. Life is far too serious and we all need to lighten up. The garden, even the windowsill garden is a great place to grow smiles. It's the whimsy that lets us open up, engage in conversation with others and face the day ourselves.

Don't be shy about using whimsy. This is your opportunity to experiment, to try things, to engage in the most important aspect of being crafty or artistic. Every smile, yours, or that smile adorning friends or strangers, is a work of art. If you provided the inspiration for that smile, then you are truly an artist. If you are willing to use the garden as a place to play, rather than work, you possess a wisdom of great value.

## Looking for the Surprise

The never ending parade of discoveries is one of the great adventures for the gardener. The surprise that lies in wait for us





around the bend in the garden path is the whimsy, the punch line, the reason so many gardeners are able to smile at themselves and the world. Because a garden, even a windowsill garden, is filled with life, there will always be something new, changes expected and unexpected, good news and bad. Too much of our time is spent in the garden looking for the work to be done when we should be discovering the surprises and experiencing the wonder of it all.

## **Making the garden accessible**

To create opportunities for those of us with limitations to actively, and fully, enjoy the benefits of the garden we may need to adapt it to facilitate our gardening activities. The following are only a few suggestions. A truly accessible garden requires more than raised beds. Stroke patients may need a table garden that a wheelchair or seating can fit under so that hand and eye coordination is possible and comfortable. This is also true for many with spinal injuries, vision limitations and damage to the nervous system. Cushioned seats and adjustable backrests may also help make gardening activities possible.

Less than 10% of America's community gardens are even wheelchair accessible. The assumption is that making our neighborhood parks, botanical gardens, school, community and family gardens accessible is prohibitively expensive. Often, failure to make a community, or your backyard, garden comfortable and accessible this isn't as much a matter of cost; it's most often a reluctance to go beyond "the way we've always done it" and apply some common sense to some basic needs and conveniences. Even when those planning a neighborhood or community garden do decide to make it convenient and accessible for seniors, rarely does anyone seek the input of the most important experts. Rarely are the elders who will be using the garden consulted. The following are only a few suggestions you might want to think about before construction begins. The same considerations apply whether it's your own backyard garden or a community garden.

1. The more level the pathways in the garden the easier the access and use will be.
2. Access ramps and railings make mobility easier and safer.
3. Paths need to be wide enough to permit easy movement of a wheelchair. A 60" width will permit two way traffic for people using walkers or wheelchairs, but a 36" path with "wide spots in the road" may be an acceptable alternative.
4. Curved paths and intersections are easier to maneuver than sharp angles. Try making a 90° turn on a 28" wide path while driving a wheelchair. Even if you are pushing someone else in that wheelchair, this isn't an easy maneuver.
5. Use pathway materials that are easy for a wheelchair or walker to traverse. In assisting with the creation of functional access we often find communities speak with pride of their user-friendly walks made with bark chips, recycled tire chips, gravel and beautiful flagstone. These may be aesthetic, but try navigating these materials with walker, cane, crutches or riding in a wheelchair.

6. Pathways and walks need to be defined with curbs to make navigation easier and safer for wheelchairs and walkers or those of us with vision limitations.
7. Container gardening elevates the plants for accessibility.
8. Raised beds & wheelchair friendly gardens provide accessibility for those of us with mobility limitations. Some of the raised beds should be on tables or stands that permit a wheelchair to roll under them for frontal access. For comfortable access there needs to be 26-30" clearance for legs and/or wheelchair arms.
9. Underground or drip irrigation systems can eliminate the danger of hoses on the pathways and save water.
10. Hanging baskets can be on pulleys for easy access from a wheelchair.
11. Think vertical. Wall gardens, gutter gardens, trellises, arbors and pergolas can put plants within easy reach.
12. Growing dwarf fruit trees makes care and harvest easier, even from a wheelchair.
13. A garden can also include perennial vegetables, berries, grapes, native plants and the traditional vegetables from the diverse cultures that make your community delightful. This helps to make the garden an adventure and a place to share memories and make discoveries.
14. The garden can be a place of beauty, serenity and peace. We can cultivate flowers along with the vegetables. They feed the spirit. They inspire us and as put us at ease.
15. We can cultivate herbs, create special corners for hummingbirds and butterflies, even grow sunflowers and cosmos for the birds. Building toad houses or fairy castles as a part of a miniature garden is a magical use of our creative abilities.
16. The community can be involved on so many levels with the work of local artists and school students on display. Recipes can be swapped, music and stories shared.
17. We can use the garden as a place to learn how to get along with each other. Bring the diversity of the community's music, dance, and food into the garden. Have "garden parties" and recipe swaps, food sampling, interactive nutrition, cooking and food preservation classes.
18. Provide sufficient space for an arbor, gazebo or benches where visitors can relax and visit in the shade. If possible a table and a couple chairs in the shade can be a comfortable conversation station where residents and family visitors can pause and chat. It also provides an opportunity to catch your breath. If possible a table and a couple chairs in the shade can be a comfortable conversation station where residents and family visitors can pause and chat. It also provides an opportunity to catch your breath.
19. There is almost always more than one right way to do almost anything. We can learn a lot

when we listen. Every garden needs a list of possibilities, not a list of rules. The garden is a great place to share yesterday's stories and grow tomorrow's opportunities.

20. Cultivate the whimsy, from creative containers to a patch of grass where folks of any age can kick off their shoes, sing nonsense songs and blow bubbles.



# Alzheimer's with a Green Thumb

adapted from the Kindle min-book with the same title by Tomi Jill Folk & Hank Bruce

## Simple Truths

1. The people-plant connection can be found almost anywhere. We think of the garden as a place we go into outdoors, but it doesn't have to be. A functional garden can be found on a windowsill or tabletop. When we can't be in the garden due to weather or ill health, we can bring the garden to us. This means we can share the experience, time, smiles and conversation. If we are caring for a relative, or a client, with dementia, we can do the same for them.
2. The garden is alive and filled with surprises. Too often we view the garden as place to sit and perhaps gaze at a rose until boredom forces us to drift into a nap's embrace. One such special moment came when a terminally ill lady was being pushed along the garden path in a wheelchair by her teenage grandson. Finally, they paused in the shade of an arbor where pink climbing roses provided shade and fragrance as well as beauty.
3. The garden is full of opportunities to experience and engage. Yet we fill it with barriers and DO NOT TOUCH signs. We are told to keep off the grass when that's where barefoot moments happen and memories are made.
4. The garden is more than a place to sit and meditate. The garden setting provides a beautiful opportunity to be active, empowered and intrigued, to have both mind and body stimulated. We can so easily create opportunities for discoveries, surprises, and smiles. The best healing garden is one where there are opportunities to be actively involved, emotionally, mentally and physically.
5. The garden is a living thing. It's ever changing, with new discoveries at every turn, new surprises every day. How can we deny anyone the opportunity to experience this?

*It's all fine and good to trigger memories, but it's far better to trigger the imagination*

## 5 Myths about Alzheimer's and the Garden

1. Alzheimer's brings an end to growing plants. Just because one is in the earlier stages of Alzheimer's, dementia or memory loss doesn't mean they can't be empowered, inspired and engaged by nurturing their plants and share time with friends. As the dementia progresses it may be necessary to limit contact with soil and some tools. This does not mean that all contact with plants and the garden must cease. It means that sensory round tables and accompanied visits to a garden designed to benefit people with memory loss are even more valuable.
2. They feel intimidated or confused in a garden setting. If this is the case, it can be corrected with changes in the walkways and the landscaping. More often they are comforted by the serenity of the garden and inspired by sensory elements. Crowded, some say cluttered, plantings with too much diversity can be overstimulation and create a stressful experience.
3. If there is a garden, it must focus on memory triggers. New discoveries are also gifts that can offer sensory experiences and even inspire creative moments. There is value in the special

moments, even when they are just that, a moment in time, not an experience to be stored to be recalled some distant tomorrow.

4. A passive experience is all we can hope for. The more actively engaged the better, even though this contact may need to be monitored. This is one of the ways the journey from isolation to socialization can happen.

5. They will damage the plants. Perhaps, but the plants can be replaced. Remember, "It's about the people, not the plants."

## **10 Ways Seniors with Alzheimer's Can Benefit from Garden Related Activities**

1. A reminisce garden can be of great value. A well planned and planted garden with once familiar plants can be so much more than a faded photograph from yesteryear, even if it doesn't serve as a memory trigger and a garden gate to yesterday remains closed. It can still be an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colors and scents, forms and feelings. Being in this garden can be an opportunity to share NOW experiences.

One of the most effective reminisce gardens we ever saw was at The Opportunity Garden, a horticultural therapy demonstration garden as a part of EPCOT's annual Flower & Garden Festival from 1999 through 2001. With the old-fashioned roses, red geraniums, blue morning glories and white daisies it was a Technicolor tour down memory lane. The best part was that everything was within reach, and no "do not touch" signs were a part of the display. This garden was also designed as a gradual unfolding of color and form as one followed the walks. It wasn't an overwhelming patchwork quilt bombarding the senses like a TV commercial.

2. Sensory stimulation is all too often limited to a variety of herbs crammed into a small space where it is difficult to isolate and identify each distinct fragrance. Our sense of smell is only one of the five physical senses and a good sensory garden will stimulate sight, touch and sometimes taste and hearing. A sensory garden can also go far beyond these physical senses to include the sense of place, purpose, and even a sense of humor.

We have seen great windowsill sensory gardens created by senior gardeners, including those with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. Part of the key is to avoid cramming all the scents together. Blend colors, textures and fragrances, but the objective needn't be to have as many kinds of plants as possible. A good sensory garden welcomes you, but it doesn't overwhelm or confuse or overwhelm.

3. Mental stimulation is often overlooked as a part of therapeutic gardening, not only as we age but during all stages of life. Mental workouts can help keep the mind alert and strong, just like our muscles when we exercise them. This doesn't mean we can reverse memory loss, but it may well be that spending some quality time with your plants can help slow the onset and advance of these conditions ranging from Alzheimer's and memory loss to difficulty concentrating and confusion. In the early and middle stages of Alzheimer's disease the opportunity to experience something new can be rewarding and invigorating for all concerned.

The garden is not a horticulture test. Mental exercise isn't a matter of right or wrong answers. What matters is that we are free to make discoveries. We may make the same discovery again tomorrow. That's okay. The mind can be stimulated by something new, something out of place, something in motion, a sound, or something whimsical. In one senior center the stroll garden has a small pond with water lilies, a potted cattail and a couple goldfish. Someone released a yellow rubber ducky into this pond one morning and everyone who followed the path to the pond returned smiling and sharing the story.

4. Socialization. At one adult day care two seniors with Alzheimer's were sitting at a table pulling the petals from pink geraniums. They were engaged in animated conversation about long ago yesterdays. Each lady was going down her own path, but they were engaged. Incidentally, neither could identify the plant they were "deflowering." One kept referring to it as a rose while her companion spoke lovingly of "this bright red daisy."

5. Being the gardener is empowering. Nurturing, cultivating, planting, watering and harvesting are all life skills. These activities are a physical and emotional link to where we once were. They are memories deep and ancient that transcend generations and cultures, but they are also yesterday's memories. Again the landscape architects don't call for strawberry beds in the design, nor do they plan tepees for pole beans and a place for squash or pumpkins to ramble. Yet, one group at an adult day care planted pumpkins and as they grew invited children from a nearby elementary school to come over and help tend the *punkin patch*. Together they painted Jack-O-Lanterns for Halloween. Sharing the pumpkins was also empowering. The role of the elder is to pass on the culture to the children. In this garden they were fulfilling their destiny. Even though faulty memory was a factor, it was not a deterrent.

6. One person's distant memory is another's new discovery. Each individual with Alzheimer's or other form of dementia has a lifetime of experiences, a unique collection of skills and talents. For many these include interaction with plants. It's that people-plant connection again. When we can celebrate that personal wealth we reinforce a sense of self-worth. When Ace tried to tell everyone at Delancy Street Senior Care about making tomato pies some laughed at him, others commented on his confusion. When his daughter brought in the old family recipe, he supervised the making of "tomato pies for everyone." For Ace this was a distant memory relived. For those who ate their first piece of tomato pie, it was a new experience. This was a lighthearted mental exercise for all, including the staff.

7. Physical engagement can go beyond the soil and the sunshine. Activities that relate to the plants, flowers, produce, and discoveries in the garden can become a part of the activities program. Leaf art, food tasting, quizzes and opinion polls, storytelling and music can all be an extension of the people-plant connection.

8. Whimsy, smiles and laughter are also a part of the well-planned garden for the individuals with Alzheimer's. Wonderful things happen to the brain and the body when we laugh. And it's even better if it's an experience shared. Whimsy is the surprise, and it may be as unplanned as a hummingbird visiting a feeder, or it may be a piece of statuary, a "blowing bubbles" session under a shade tree, or a series of Burma Shave type signs along a garden path. Planning and placing whimsy in the back yard can be fun for individuals with memory loss and their family members.

In senior care programs both the staff and the clients can relax and laugh. There's a lot to be said for going barefoot on the grass whether it's a brand-new experience or a distant childhood memory. See *Senior's Illustrated Vol. 1* by Hank Bruce & Tomi Jill Folk.

9. Depression, anger, frustration and isolation can decrease in the garden. When one is focused on planting, tending and harvesting there is a certain peace within. Some call this harmony, but regardless of what you call it, endorphins are released in the brain. Smiles may be spontaneous and conversations may just happen. One of my volunteers insists, "It's as good as chocolate." Because the plants play such a large and diverse role in human existence, this people-plant connection touches us in so many different ways. For each person the connection is unique, a one of a kind, personal scrap book. The act of visiting this connection can provide a sense of place and purpose. Again, this need not be a new memory to be stored and revisited some time in the future, it is a NOW moment, and that's enough to celebrate.

10. **Spiritually.** Being with plants provides a sense of our place in the universe, communion with nature and a sense of peace and harmony. Too often we think that we must be engaged in "activities," but sometimes "being" is activity enough. Sometimes opening the soul to the diversity of beauty is a special kind of engagement. Feeling the leaves or smelling the flowers can be an inspirational experience.

### **Potential risks in the Alzheimer's garden**

1. One of the big concerns with Alzheimer's and gardening is the tendency to taste things like leaves, flowers and soil. When this becomes a problem perhaps it's time to engage in other activities than planting and growing live goods. But if we are careful in our selection of plant materials and avoid lawn & garden chemicals we can prevent most of the potential problems.

2. There is the concern about falling, or hurting oneself with the tools of gardening. While there are adapted tools that are somewhat safer, wisdom and caution need to be exercised, along with vigilance. There are many plant related activities that don't require dangerous tools.

3. Forgetting to care for the plant is one of the most common concerns, and this is valid. For the earlier stages this is not usually a problem, but as the process continues it becomes a reality. Individual 'pet plants' may need to become part of a community garden, or care may need to be shared. Keep in mind there are many common plants that are rugged enough to survive neglect or excess watering, etc.

4. Some plants aren't safe. We know the obvious ones like those with sharp spines, poison ivy or stinging nettles. But philodendron & tomato leaves and many of the common bulbs, such as tulips, daffodils and amaryllis are toxic. Most hospitals and pharmacies have a list of dangerous plants. If in doubt, contact them immediately. It may also be time to review the safe and dangerous plants lists in *Gardens for the Senses, Gardening as Therapy, revised and expanded* written by Hank Bruce

5. A greater danger can be found in the pesticides on plants purchased from garden centers and the chemicals used in lawn and landscape maintenance. With the elderly, folks on certain medications or those of us experiencing various health complications, the risk is much greater



than it might be for a younger adult. It is best to purchase plants grown organically or grow your own to avoid the risk.

6. Too much sunshine and heat can be dangerous to the frail elderly and those using certain medications. Heat stroke is a concern for all ages. Dehydration can also cause serious problems. This is why we advise structures for shade, places to sit, lots of water and constant monitoring.

## **Discovery Gardens**

a touch of paradise somewhere, between yesterday and tomorrow

### **Mobility of the mind**

This mind of yours is remarkable. With it you can travel through time and space. This is the power of reading, storytelling and visiting the garden. The people-plant connection has been a significant part of our survival throughout history. When we grow traditional and heritage plants we can visit yesterday. As we plant the seeds and nurture the seedlings, the mind can move forward in time to harvest. The mind can taste the apple pie when the first apple blossom opens to the morning sun. Our minds can carry us back to a childhood home and games played under the lilacs. Sometimes we can direct these mental journeys. Other times we are just along for the ride. The following are a few of the tools we can use on the journey.

### **The scratch & sniff landscape, sensory stimulation**

Experiencing with our senses has the potential to temporarily improve cognition, provide opportunities for conversation and give us pleasure. When Gary found the apricots on the tree at the far end of the stroll garden he picked a hat full and brought them back to the activity room to share with his friends. He couldn't remember the name of this delicious fruit, but he knew it was something everyone would enjoy. When Marilyn picked the daisy she remembered perfectly the "he loves me, he loved me not" ritual, even though she couldn't remember her husband's name. Emma was absolutely enthralled with the Monarch butterfly and followed it around the garden for more than twenty minutes. These were all moments experienced physically, mentally and emotionally. It's worth noting that they transcended time in each personal journey of the moment.

Creating the sensory garden can be an empowering experience and a great home project for a family, or it can be creative exercise for a senior care community staff and residents. This is an opportunity to share work, play and life experiences. We suggest that you don't try to plant the entire garden at once. It's best to establish the garden in small steps, adding a plant or two at a time. Keep in mind, a sensory garden can be both indoors and out. It's best if all the family members, even friends and neighbors, can be a part of this creative endeavor, especially the ones with dementia, memory loss or cognitive limitations. In a senior care program the residents, clients or patients can be actively involved in every step of the planning, creation and nurturing of their garden.

The opportunity to be a physical part of the preparation and planting, and to be present and watch the garden grow is also mental stimulation and positive engagement. When we provide time and opportunities for everyone to share comments, observations and stories everyone can take an active role in the garden, and experience it more confidently and completely.

Most of the sensory plants should be accessible. They need to be close enough to be felt, smelled, and talked to. Yes, conversation with plants can be encouraged. This means we have to know which plants are safe and which ones can be toxic. Don't hesitate to use non-plant materials, statuary, flags, fountains, ponds, plastic butterflies, spinners and any other great ideas that someone shares.

There are always opportunities to engage in craft activities and artistic expression using what is being grown. Gourds can be made into rattles, bird houses or lamps. Sunflower seeds can make a lot of song birds happy. In one senior community garden program the sunflower seedheads were dried and, after the seeds were removed for the birds, the empty heads were spray painted different colors then smiley faces were painted on them. These collectively made an enormous prize winning entry in the state fair. A little creativity can turn pumpkins into Jack-O-Lanterns or pumpkin pies. Even dandelion flowers and stems can become chains and crowns, and the creativity goes on and on. This garden art can be a celebration of the memories, curiosity and imagination of people working both individually and together.

Attract wildlife including butterflies, hummingbirds, songbirds, and even a Woolly Bear caterpillar or two. Note: The Woolly Bears will feed on dandelion leaves until they spin their cocoons, take a long nap and wake up with wings.

It's easy to incorporate reminiscence plants into the sensory garden, but the plantings don't need to be limited to yesterday's favorites. If this is a sensory garden designed for the pleasure and benefit of elders, they should have the opportunity to suggest plants and garden decor. It may be helpful to use some old photos from real gardens or pages from the newest crop of seed and nursery catalogs. A field trip to a local garden center may also be a way to spark ideas and comments.

### **Going beyond the five physical senses**

This is one of the goals of a sensory garden. Certainly a sensory garden can tickle the five physical senses, but this is only the beginning. There are opportunities to discover the emotional senses including, but not limited to:

**Sense of self** - reclaiming memories and habits that help us identify with our family and culture. Using the connections with the soil, the Earth itself, is one way to find ourselves. Sometimes this is a matter of rediscovering who we are after trauma or great personal loss. Sometimes it can be a part of the grief process. Working with the soil and plants can be a valuable way to heal ourselves.

**Sense of place** - "Where am I right now?" is often a difficult question to answer, but a calm corner in a garden filled with familiar plants can help us understand life's journey. One lady wrote a journal she titled *Places I Have Lived*. This writing was a stroll through time, from earliest memories of childhood to where she was today. Most of these homes were defined by sensory connections with the garden, preparing meals, horses and hikes along mountain trails.

**Sense of being** - I garden, therefore I am. The people-plant connection helps define our existence, who we are and what our role in the universe is. "We are defined by the feel of bare feet in the grass and dirt under our fingernails." one of our volunteers was fond of saying.

**Sense of belonging** - being part of a group provides friendship, socialization and mutual support. But we belong to more than a family, group, or community. We belong to a culture and an active and ever changing set of traditions. This belonging may include faith systems, language and ethnic background, education and occupation.

**Sense of purpose** - I am needed again. I have responsibilities. I have the opportunity to nurture the plants in my life. When life seems meaningless and we don't feel needed anymore, the plants on the windowsill or in the garden, call out to us.

**Sense of imagination** - new experiences may trigger both memories of the past and expectations for a future. This is the creative part of our minds at work, or perhaps it's at play.

**Sense of humor** - this is great medicine. A smile may be inspired by a piece of statuary, or a recycled item used as a pot. One elder with a sense of humor set up a chess set on a table in his back yard. Then he positioned two ceramic cats as if they were playing. Norma was bored while recovering from hip surgery. Then she began creating whimsical signs with riddles on them. When she returned home she began placing them in the pots, hanging baskets and with plants around her back yard and patio. This became an ever-changing activity for both her grandchildren and the home healthcare team when they visited.

**Sense of discovery** - The ever-changing moments in the garden can both inspire and empower us. The new flower, a seed sprouting, a toad watching a caterpillar, a squirrel planting acorns, leaves dancing in a warm breeze or snowflakes collecting on a rosemary plant are all discoveries that affect us. These discoveries can be even richer when we are able to share them and the stories they inspire.

**Sense of spiritual connectedness** - We are not alone. Each of us is a part of all creation. We are both creation and creator when our mind and heart are free to explore, discover and imagine.

### **Sharing the experience & momentary awareness**

The people-plant connection provides a never-ending array of opportunities for socialization. Conversation may be in disjointed comments. Statements may be wrong, but this doesn't matter. Correction is neither necessary nor useful. In fact it can be negative. Just let it be. Simply celebrate the moment.

**1. One-on-one or groups** is a debate often heard among professionals, but it depends on the individuals involved. If group interaction makes someone feel uncomfortable then perhaps one-on-one time spent with a family or staff member is the best, while small groups may energize others. Interaction can be better if this small group has familiar faces present, even if the names aren't remembered.

**2. Looking for the surprise** is something each of us can do. It's a great way to start the day. All we have to do is spend a few minutes with our plants, either indoors or out, looking for the surprises these living things are so willing to provide. It may be a new leaf, or a flower opening, or an unidentified seed sprouting. Perhaps there is a dove visiting, or a katydid sharing a song. These

are your gifts each day. Often they can be shared as well as enjoyed alone.

A simple activity that has worked well in many adult day care programs can depend on either these naturally occurring gifts, or clients or staff can place unexpected items around the stroll garden or among the plants on the windowsill. Usually this is something whimsical or totally out of place. One of the most memorable was a purple teddy bear that appeared one day sitting under a bush reading a book. The lady who discovered this surprise squealed with delight, sat down beside her new friend and began to read the book to him. She named him “Blue” and he sat beside her in a chair of his own for lunch. He even took part in the afternoon activities. They were the best of friends for months after she found him.

**3. *Treasure hunts have also been popular.*** A paper with pictures of items to be found can be provided to each individual or team. They may include such items as a pinecone, a dandelion blossom, a morning glory, a little American flag, a beanie baby, a silk rose, whatever is available. Often they end up having so much fun with what is found that the rest of the list is forgotten. The objects found often become topics for conversation and the sharing of stories. That’s great.

**4. *Keeping a journal*** is a continuing activity that provides opportunities to celebrate the here and now moments. We encourage both individual and group garden journals that contain notes, pictures from magazines and catalogs, photos, artwork, poetry and comments. In one adult day care one of the ladies discovered a four-leaf clover while visiting their stroll garden. She pressed it in the journal, along with a short poem she wrote about “Lucky Clover.”

**Keep it simple.** Sensory overload can be a negative experience. Sometimes, in our attempt to provide as much sensory stimulation as possible, we overdo it. We overload and overwhelm. This can result in confusion, frustration, anxiety, fear, antagonism, anger or simply shutting down. Avoid trying to manage the time spent in sensory programs. Let the flow of engagement be your guide. We all have different attention spans at different times. This may vary depending on distractions ranging from weather, health or medications to the time of day.

Remember, not only is the sensory plant providing stimulation, so are all the words being spoken, the movements of everyone nearby, and unplanned distractions. Try to avoid corrections, lecturing and seizing teaching moments. This isn’t a classroom. These folks have graduated from that part of life.

## **The Paradise Garden**

Many senior communities, adult day care and Alzheimer’s care facilities now include a small garden designed specifically for Alzheimer’s clients. These are sometimes called Paradise Gardens. They are designed to make the visitor feel at ease, comfortable and secure.

Perhaps, someday, we will see such a garden available to the public as a part of a community park, senior center or botanical garden. Unfortunately, this is not yet a reality. The simple fact remains that individuals and families can greatly benefit from applying some of the basic guidelines to the home backyard or that of a friend or relative. In a private setting there can be opportunities to engage in unchallenged conversation, one-on-one and without stress and pressure. In your own backyard you can cultivate safe plants, plants that are “old friends” to the individual

dealing with dementia. It's great if you can engage that individual in the planning nurturing of the plants.

### **Basic garden features you may wish to consider**

1. The enclosing wall, for safety, security and privacy.
2. Curving paths are easy to follow and less likely to confuse or cause apprehension than intersections and right angles.
3. Water features such as a small pond, a fountain, splash or touch pool can both fascinate and put one at ease.
4. A shelter, canopy or pergola with seating can allow for conversation, and lower the stress level.
5. Contour, such as a raised bed or small hill to provide sense of vista and openness.
6. A small area with real grass that can be viewed, felt and stepped on with bare feet.
7. Sensory plants, and this may include butterfly gardens and bird feeders.
8. Whimsy, colorful statuary, bird feeders, artwork

This is often viewed as passive engagement, but if it is done properly, without crowded plantings that can overwhelm, it can be comforting and relaxing. If the individual is able, and chooses to, active engagement can be even better. This special garden setting, large or small, can diminish agitation, violence and anxiety.

In a study by Mooney and Nicell (1992) incidents involving aggressive behaviors decreased by approximately 19%. Recent studies done in France seem to indicate that participation in gardening activities improved cognitive performance and physical ability while slowing the rate of decline in individuals with dementia. The overall quality of life for both the individual with Alzheimer's and the family was enhanced.

Remember that the view from the window is an important part of these special gardens. When the weather is uncomfortable or unsafe, being able to sit and watch from the comfort of a climate controlled environment can still be beneficial. The careful placing of colorful plants, a butterfly garden or bird feeder can provide more interesting entertainment than most afternoon TV. The elements of nature are also easier to connect with and the pace is usually self determined.

Psychologically the garden and related activities provide a safe and convenient connection with nature. Some consider these paradise, discovery and healing gardens a substitute for nature, but in reality they are nature, adapted and modified to make them safe and accessible oases of life.

These gardens work when approached from the perspective that we are all a part of nature, not apart from the real world. We instinctively need to be connected. This is what the people-plant connection is about. It's a primal sense within us. This is often referred to as a spiritual experience and sometimes an emotional need. Regardless of what you call it, we are comforted, empowered and strengthened by this communion with life. Within nature, within the garden, we find our place in the universe and our place in the cycles of life and time. Even when the garden is a plant on the windowsill, it's the answer to this need within us. Whether we are actively or passively a part of the garden, it's experiential, it's a connection our body, mind and spirit can celebrate.

## Sensory Roundtables

For many elders living with family or in senior care communities, rehab centers, hospitals, or adult day care, the activity of preparing cuttings or sowing seeds, planting and tending a garden, is beyond their mental or physical limitations. A few friends or family members gathering around a table is a familiar setting and creates less stress than formal activities. Even for individuals with more advanced stages of Alzheimer's this simple experience can encourage response and engagement.

A sensory roundtable can be a real table, or any setting where a small number of people can be comfortable with the setting and each other as they pass around a couple different kinds of apples and sip some apple juice. What is done at a sensory roundtable depends on the individuals involved.

### Ten tips for successful sensory roundtables

The success or failure of a sensory roundtable can be influenced by many factors that are beyond the control of family members, the horticultural therapist or activities professional, such as:

1. Time of day for the session. Midmorning is often the best, but right after lunch, or shortly after medications have been taken may not be the time of day when one is most alert or able to participate.
2. Attitude of family members or staff. A willingness to participate and positive engagement can be a valuable success factor. Sometimes family and friends worry too much, feel compelled to correct or make the experience stressful by making too much like a classroom.
3. Number of participants. With a family setting or in professional senior care, the number of people involved is best determined by what size group the individual is comfortable with. This may change from day to day. Usually a small number, such as three to five allows for the best participation.
4. Avoid trying to cover too much material. This can confuse the individual and create stress for everyone involved.
5. Keep It Simple. This works best for all concerned. Remember that each individual comes to the table with a different set of experiences, memories, fears, expectations, ability to concentrate and attention span.
6. Keep the program short. 30 to 45 minutes is usually about the attention span limit, but in a family setting this can best be determined by watching the individual with dementia.
7. Be aware of the physical, mental and emotional limitations *of all who will be participating*. If we expect too much from the individual with Alzheimer's or memory loss, we can create frustration, anger or withdrawal. Our goal is to encourage active engagement and input, but not force a response.
8. Safety factors are critical. If a participant cannot swallow and we offer her a taste of ginger ale,

a serious choking incident may occur. Even a scratch from a rose thorn that becomes infected can have serious consequences.

9. Make the roundtable one part integrated part of an overall program of socialization, sensory stimulation and active participation. No part of a horticultural therapy program exists unto itself, even if this is a family activity.

10. Discuss favorite plants and ways to present them as a part of the sensory roundtable. The participants can be a valuable resource and their input can mean the difference between success and failure.





# **Social and therapeutic horticulture at Thrive**

the premier horticultural therapy program in the UK 1-18-2020

Social and therapeutic horticulture is the process of using plants and gardens to improve physical and mental health, as well as communication and thinking skills.

Gardening is a wonderfully flexible medium that can transform lives and Thrive sees first-hand how gardening can help everyone, regardless of age or disability.

Social and therapeutic horticulture uses the garden as a safe and secure place to develop someone's ability to mix socially, make friends and learn practical skills that will help them to be more independent.

Using gardening tasks and the garden itself, Thrive horticultural therapists build a set of activities for each gardener to improve their particular health needs, and to work on certain goals they want to achieve.

## **The benefits of a sustained and active interest in gardening include:**

1. Better physical health through exercise and learning how to use or strengthen muscles to improve mobility
2. Improved mental health through a sense of purpose and achievement
3. The opportunity to connect with others – reducing feelings of isolation or exclusion
4. Acquiring new skills to improve the chances of finding employment
5. Just feeling better for being outside, in touch with nature and in the 'great outdoors'
6. Health and wellbeing
7. Therapy and rehabilitation

## **Social and therapeutic horticulture (STH) can benefit people in a number of ways:**

1. It can be part of a person's rehabilitation process, to help them recover and 'find their feet again' after an illness or a difficult time in their lives
2. It can help people recover from a wide range of conditions
3. It can help people to learn new skills
4. It can help slow down the deterioration seen when someone has a degenerative illness.
5. Social and therapeutic horticultural also benefits people with many different disabilities, including those recovering from stroke and heart disease, blind and partially sighted people, those in the early stages of dementia, and people with physical and learning disabilities.

## **People can benefit from horticultural therapy:**

1. At a garden project, where they are referred and funded by their doctor, social worker or care professional. Others start at a project through their own initiative, and their place may be funded by their family and friends.
2. Through gardening at home, perhaps by starting with a simple idea like planting a small container or window box, or growing some herbs on a sunny window sill.
3. Garden projects can be small informal places, perhaps organised and run by volunteers, or they can be more formal, larger organisations and charities, run by permanent staff.

4. Projects may have their own site or they may share facilities, perhaps within a garden centre or nursery. Garden projects are also found in the grounds of prisons or hospitals.

### **Experimental HT projects researched at Thrive:**

#### **1. Photography**

The first effort was to have staff photographing activity sequences, but almost immediately participants were using their cell phones to photograph their work and their companions at work. There was frequent posing and laughter during this process.

After these unplanned photo ops there was more interaction, memory of steps and ability to explain why they did what they did and what their expectations were. The participants, or family members granted permission before photography was permitted, but they immediately began sharing their pictures with each other. The quality of life was best expressed with the smiles, laughter and conversation.

#### **2. Being with Nature**

Many of the participants were dealing with trauma, PTSD, depression, substance abuse and a variety of physical and mental conditions that left them viewing the city, neighborhood or family as artificial, uncomfortable, overwhelming, confusing, frightening often violent.

The garden, park, fields or forests were REAL, SAFE and COMFORTING. They almost instantly were able to replace and experience a sense of place and belonging.

The most frequently used term from participants was that they had a feeling they belonged in this place.

From questionnaires to Participant interviews. They were given a sheet of topics, a few in question format. These they discussed, sometimes with individuals assuming the role of interviewer. This limited the stress from the sense of a classroom, with expectations that what was said with either right or wrong, and they needed to always be right.

What the program offered to these individuals dealing with stress, depression, isolation, confusion or fear. An opportunity to relax and engage. They found that this was often complicated or facilitated by the way the therapeutic elements were presented.

#### **The comfort level and sense of being in a safe place provided opportunities for different client goals including:**

relaxing  
discovering  
interaction with surroundings and other people  
communication  
sharing stories, thoughts, experiences and material goods  
Jokes and laughter