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Support is growing for the rejuvenating effects of working with plants through horticultural therapy

Written by
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National Horticultural Therapy Week is being celebrated this week. The week promotes horticultural therapy and the work of horticultural therapists.

Horticultural therapists are trained to evaluate the abilities and needs of each individual. By matching the person's interests, skills and needs with appropriate plant-related activities, the therapist can help the individual reach goals. Two examples might be increased muscle strength, or improved socialization skills.

Horticultural therapists are typically part of a treatment team. In a clinical setting, the team would also include a clinical or medical director, a counselor and a social worker. In a rehabilitative setting the team might include a doctor, an orthopedist, a nurse, an occupational or speech therapist and a social worker or counselor. Treatment teams vary depending on the client and the setting.

Horticultural Therapy Week is getting recognized at the state level, too. A bill designating the third week of March in New Jersey as Horticultural Therapy Week, sponsored by state Sen. Christopher "Kip" Bateman, R-Dist. 16, was passed unanimously by members of the Senate Health and Human Services Senior Citizens Committee Monday, and Sen. Joseph Vitale, D-Dist. 19, has agreed to cosponsor it. A companion bill in the Assembly is sponsored by Assemblywoman Donna Simon, R-Dist. 16. If the bill passes, New Jersey will be the first state to adopt legislation to formally raise awareness about horticultural therapy.

I've been working to build awareness of horticultural therapy, not only through my writing, but also as a practitioner and director of 41 Rotary clubs in Central Jersey. Edible Jersey Magazine also featured a story about horticultural therapy last November.

To help raise awareness locally, the fourth annual Bridgewater Spring Senior Health Fair this Thursday will include a horticultural therapy exhibit by my company, Final Touch Plantscaping, to educate the public about the value and benefits of horticultural therapy, and explain what distinguishes it from other types of garden interactions.

The health fair, part of the mayor's wellness initiative, will take place from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Senior Citizens Center, 455 Somerville Road, Bridgewater. For more information, contact Chris O. Poulsen, Bridgewater Township director of human services, at 908-725-5750 or at health@bridgewaternj.gov.

Plants are beautiful, responsive to care, and productive. A person who takes care of plants can come to perceive him- or herself as successful, nurturing, productive and creative, with gifts to share. Horticultural therapy activities may be practiced year-round, indoors or outdoors. Activities may take place in a greenhouse, a garden, or in a designated space that is accessible, barrier-free and designed for the maximum safety, participation and development of the individual. Activities may include the growing of plants; nature crafts and floral design; and garden maintenance, from weeding to watering to pruning.

Horticultural therapists provide any needed support, including adaptive devices, tools or physical assistance. Horticultural therapists are trained to use plants and the cycles of nature to teach life skills. In working with clients, therapists explain and implement social and psychological concepts, including nurturing, responsibility, the importance of strong "roots" and the value of rejuvenation.

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This sensory Garden designed and installed by Final Touch Plantscaping, for active participation and/or passive viewing and reflection.
PHOTO COURTESY LAURA DePRADO

Getting into the mood

Here are 10 things you can do to connect with nature safely.

1. Place fresh flowers where you can see them.
2. Look through seed catalogs.
3. Start herbs for your kitchen window sill.
4. Take a walk through an arboretum or park
5. Decorate a flower pot.
6. Visit a local greenhouse.
7. Start plants from seeds.
8. Make a pinecone bird feeder. Place seeds in coffee filter. Brush a pine cone in peanut butter, and roll over the seeds. Then hang it outside. Bird activity is guaranteed to keep them busy and you occupied watching them.
9. Cut stems from flowering shrubs and trees outside. Bring them indoors, place in water, keeping stems fresh and force the blooms.
10. Visit a local store and explore all of the different seed packets, and starting kits available.



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