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Project Grow assists people with disabilities through farming

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Written by
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WEST WINDSOR – One farm-based horticultural therapy program in New Jersey offers individuals with disabilities an opportunity to receive employment training and horticultural therapy as well as environmental education in a healthy productive environment.

Project Grow is located on the West Windsor campus of Mercer County Community College. It is an innovative farming initiative created by Allies Inc., which operates 24-7 group homes, day programs and supported living serving 300 individuals through 150 programs. The company, based in Hamilton, was founded in 1999, and has grown from two volunteers to 800 employees state-wide. It is committed to helping people with disabilities and provides support services to enhance the physical, social and emotional lives of people with special needs enabling them to become active participants in their communities.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Project Grow is located on the West Windsor campus of Mercer County Community College
- Program participants learn how to manage a fully operational farm starting with preparing the soil to harvesting and distributing the crops
- Project Grow spans one acre of land and consists of a full garden and 12 raised beds of flowers, produce and herbs
- The farm-based horticultural therapy program offers participants an opportunity to receive employment training and horticultural therapy

Allies Inc. Project Grow and Mercer County Community College (MCCC) have partnered to create a community-integrated program experience for participants with special needs. Program participants learn how to manage a fully operational farm starting with preparing the soil to harvesting and distributing the crops. Through guidance provided by a registered

horticultural therapist and an on-site farmer, participants begin preparing the land and planting harvest crops in April. Project Grow emphasizes creating positive relationships, learning employment skills, and gaining a greater sense of self-reliance while experiencing job training in the farming industry.

Project Grow spans one acre of land and consists of a full garden and 12 raised beds of flowers, produce and herbs. It is made possible through strong community partnerships, which include MCCC, Developing Real Expectations for Achieving Mastery Program, Rutgers Cooperative Extension and most recent Rotary District 7510.

During my visit in late July, I had the opportunity to visit and tour the gardens. Upon my arrival to the horticulture area of campus Francis, one of the program's participants couldn't wait to greet me and show me the flowerbeds she is growing lush with zinnias, straw flowers, dusty millers and nasturtiums. Francis has learned to flower arrange. It is her job, and she is successful.

"Coming here gives me purpose and makes me feel good. Look, at my rosemary. Look at the green beans. Look at the flowers," she said with pride and excitement.

"Horticultural therapy is valuable and important. I see what it's done for Francis who is in her 70s," said MaryAnne McMillan, registered horticultural therapist and president of the American Horticultural Therapy Association, a nonprofit organization and the only national U.S. organization committed to the promotion and development of horticultural therapy to improve human well-being. In 2011 McMillan received the AHTA John Walker Community Service Award at its 38th national conference. The award is in recognition of significant contribution to horticultural therapy in the area of program services provided for a community.

"Our farm program offers consumers to get outside, get physical, learn horticulture, seed propagation, harvesting, and recipes through the nutrition component of the program," McMillan added.

I also met, talked with and watched the collaboration of three high school student volunteers for nearly two hours working and earning community service hours to build their resumes. On this day they created two flowerbeds in front of the fenced-in flower gardens.

"At first I had no interest," said Ross Talbot, a Hamilton West High School senior, who was working with his twin brother, Doug. "I love the progress I see. It's so positive to see something birth, and nurture and raise it to maturity," he said.

His brother Doug added, “I will encourage my peers to volunteer to farm, landscape, and earn community service hours, so they know what it’s like to work.”

Steinert High School junior, Kurt Tobie, said he loves planting anything. “This is my first time at the gardens. My job is to weed and mulch today. It’s so rewarding.”

Nick Stryker is the farmer fulfilling the practicum portion of his studies in horticultural therapy through online courses at Kansas State University, and working toward becoming an HTR, or registered horticultural therapist. “My role is split between farmer and HT,” he said. “I work with higher functioning adults ages 21 and older with autism. This program provides vocational and social outreach for participants.”

“Project Grow could not be possible if it wasn’t for the college, which has been so generous in allowing us to use all the horticulture facilities including the building, the land, the greenhouses and the garage,” McMillan said. According to Don Tretola, senior vice president for public affairs and program development, future plans include increasing community partners by 50 percent. An example may include providing a food pantry with fresh produce and herbs for distribution, and welcoming in turn, their volunteer services.

“Our goal is to increase the number of volunteering of individuals and groups,” Tretola added.

Allies Inc. also operates three stores in Somerville, Mount Holly, and the newly opened Greensleeves Boutique in Flemington, a green initiative to provide gently worn clothing, vintage and fabulous finds to the public, while providing on-site job training and education to individuals with disabilities. Participants in the program experience the gratification of working in teams to develop innovative ideas to creatively address some of society’s biggest challenges while developing an understanding of environmental sustainability.

To learn more about partnering with Allies Inc. or volunteer opportunities, contact Kelly Beach at kbeach@alliesnj.org.

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