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## Horticultural therapy between plants and people

*Horticultural therapy works by creating interactions between plants and people typically in a garden or greenhouse. Abingdon's horticultural activities take place twice a month in Green Brook.*

Written by  
**Laura DePrado**

In June I became part of a treatment team facilitating horticultural therapy activity sessions for elders in long-term care at Abingdon Care and Rehabilitation Center in Green Brook. Abingdon provides a range of post-hospital and long-term transition services including surgical recovery, physical, occupational and speech therapies, stroke recovery and hospice/end-of-life care. Abingdon is part of Windsor Healthcare Communities serving Somerset, Middlesex, Union, Essex, Passaic and Bergen counties.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Abingdon provides a range of post hospital and long-term transition services
- Horticultural therapy works by creating interactions between plants and people

Horticultural therapy works by creating interactions between plants and people, typically in a garden or greenhouse. Abingdon's horticultural activities take place twice a month in the main gathering room on the second floor. The group of 11 to 17 participants (known as elders), ranges in age from 70s to 90s, male and female, physically impaired with mild to moderate cognitive impairments.

Evidence-based research shows that horticultural therapy offers an opportunity for quiet reflection while simultaneously providing a task to occupy the patient's thoughts. This, quite often, releases the mind from obsessive thoughts about the person's physical or emotional ailments.

The benefits of horticultural therapy have been tested and well documented for individuals who are recovering from many different kinds of medical conditions, both physical and psychological. It enhances cognitive functioning, concentration, long- and short-term memory, goal achievement and attention. It can create a sense of accomplishment and patients often perceive it as rewarding. Horticultural therapy stimulates the senses with scents, textures, colors and sounds. Participating in horticultural therapy improves mobility, balance, endurance, memory and coordination.



*Elders created November Garden Harvest in a vase using lavender, thyme, yellow mums, ornamental peppers and leaf stems of a dwarf Japanese maple tree and a scarecrow. (PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA DEPRADO)*

“We believe that specific care niches will be needed as long-term care services are provided in-home instead of the nursing home. We view programs like Horticultural Therapy as very important examples of services that may not in some case be feasible for someone who lives alone at home,” said Bob Reyes, administrator for Abingdon Care and Rehabilitation Center. Reyes, also a certified nursing home administrator and a fellow of the American College of Health Care Administrators, has more than 30 years of progressive health managerial experience in the acute- and long-term care industries.

The horticultural team includes Life Enrichment Coordinator Desiree Strong, Vicki Cardona, a recreation aide, and myself, as horticultural therapy practitioner.

“HT stimulates the senses, visual, tactile, olfactory, sound and taste. We don’t realize how important it is to engage these senses if we don’t have impairments, and lose function,” said Strong.

As a staff member, Cardona also shared, “The elder residents look forward to the program every time I mention it to them. It’s amazing when the elders bring simple materials to life and I watch them come alive knowing they made something beautiful. They love when they know they made this project and it’s theirs to own, or to give away to family, friend, or staff member.”

“The HT program brings a smile to my face before and after the program,” she added. “It’s nice to know Laura and I are going to work together to give back and make a significant change in the elders’ physically, emotionally and mentally.”

“Horticultural therapy eliminates boredom, engages the senses, increases self-worth, sense of belonging, meaning, and stimulates mentally, physically, socially. Elders are at the stage of life where they need attention and purpose. They are done with their mission in life. Now they are aging in place,” Reyes said. “Life enrichment like horticultural therapy activities are important in a place like this as this is their home.”

Plans envisioned for the program, according to Strong, “include potting up small plants indoors as the colder months approach. In the spring we can start outside with the flower pots that are wheelchair accessible, and a vegetable garden for the residents and develop a sensory garden to inspire a place of calm to our sensory programs.”

Horticultural therapy has been shown to improve quality of life, self-esteem, sense of well-being, and mood; it can decrease stress and anxiety, with some possible benefits for patients suffering from depression. Social interactions have been improved through horticultural therapy, and patients can learn healthier patterns of social functioning as well as how to contribute to a group. Physically, it can improve the immune response, decrease heart rate, and develop fine and gross motor skills as well as hand-eye coordination.

But, perhaps the best measure of the contribution horticultural therapy brings to a nursing home are the warm smiles evident on elders as they continue to make life grow through the work of their hands.

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