



Senior finds life connecting with plants

Laura DePrado, Final Touch Plantscaping 12:02 p.m. EDT September 19, 2016

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Lorraine of Oldwick is 90 years old.

This month, she achieved 430 horticultural therapy sessions and continues to engage with flowers and plants in her indoor “garden” since May 2013. She is getting nature inside. She has created countless flower arrangements, propagated plants by cuttings and division, and started and nurtured vegetables, herbs and annuals from seed.

She dries countless flowers throughout the seasons and creates sachets and “memory jars,” of seashells, lavender, rose petals and succulents. She cares for indoor house plants, both flowering and nonflowering. She is fascinated by, and enjoys blooms of colors, fragrances, textures and shapes in which she is surrounded, anticipating things to come. She initiates and engages in purposeful and meaningful activities. She feels safe. She is empowered. She is successful. She is proud.

In May 2013, I received a call from a home-care agency, Right at Home, which services seniors living at home in Somerset and Hunterdon counties. The agency was seeking my help with one of their senior patients, an 86-year-old who resides at home. She was disconnected, disengaged, clinically diagnosed with depression, lethargic, genuinely uninterested, restricted to her home and wheelchair, and reliant on live-in caregiver (provided by the agency) for all of her daily needs.

All of her family members are deceased except for one niece who lives in the Midwest. Socially isolated, the client had not been outside in months because she was afraid to leave her home. The agency called upon my services, as they, and the legal guardian, Frank Whittlesey, could not get her to take interest in, or engage her, in any activities.

In June 2011, Lorraine had a stroke. Superstorm Sandy hit New Jersey on Oct. 29, 2012, and on the 30th she was removed to a shelter. For 14 days, she was away from her home. All of her plants died. She didn't speak, she was depressed. She was anxious. She was despondent.

"She was not going to leave her home again," Whittlesey said.

"As the court-appointed guardian for Lorraine, I have observed her progress through the involvement of Laura DePrado," he continued. "The horticultural therapy has given Lorraine new life and changed her outlook. When I first became involved with her, she was withdrawn and the therapy has been lifesaving in my opinion."

Dr. Theresa Sacchieri of Annandale Family Practice said, "I have been so impressed with the positive effects, both cognitive and emotional, on one of my senior patients, that I have asked Laura to work with more of my patients whom I feel would benefit from horticultural therapy."

Observational Assessment and Research published in Hort Technology of a “Dementia-specific horticultural therapy program” reveals that horticultural therapy is suitable for older adults because it can be adapted to various levels of physical ability and its benefits can decrease or slow the negative effects of aging (for example, gait, or instability) and reduce the occurrence of negative behaviors associated with dementia.

“HT can be modified for varying social and cognitive impairments brought on by dementia so that individuals can experience success in the activity regardless of their ability or impairments,” the 1992 study reports.

Research also shows that contact with nature and being outdoors helps to reduce agitation and aggression. Exercise and movement outdoors has been shown to improve sleep patterns, mood, memory, appetite, strength, agility and balance. We now also know that nature contact and being outdoors contributes to emotional and spiritual well-being and provides cognitive stimulation.

These are some of the reasons why a lifestyle that includes nature and outdoors delays the onset of dementia for people living at home. What was once intuitive is increasingly evidence-based. Horticultural therapy is appropriate

for dementia care programs serving adults with a wide range of cognitive, physical and social needs, and it should be considered as a viable alternative to more typical dementia care program activities.

Through supportive architecture, as referred by Chalfont, windows and doors have a role to play in moderating sunlight and daylight for my client and making possible a horticultural area for growing plants and growing nature inside. Our sessions take place in the parlor (which at one time was used for gatherings and entertaining guests). Her bay windows deliver light in, and allows plants to thrive.

I have a table set up where we conduct our activities and where we engage in supportive nature, connecting in seasonally related planting, transplanting, seed starting, flower arranging, pressing and arranging flowers and problem solving when nature isn't growing the way you like. The parlor supports horticulture activities. Nature provides sensory stimulation and the client communicates, expresses and interacts using plants.

In August 2015, U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance, R-N.J., 7th District, presented Lorraine with American flag that was flown over the Capitol in her honor at a small event held at Melick's Town Farm in celebration of 300 sessions. She also received a state and General Assembly citation for her "dedication, determination, commitment, success, and support for horticultural therapy," as well as a proclamation from the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders. This was the first time Lorraine had left her home in many months.

She recalls the event as she strokes the flag and photos of the celebration. She smiles with wide eyes.

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