



Horticultural therapy: Saying thanks to Al Murray, a supporter of New Jersey agriculture industry

Laura DePrado, Final Touch Plantscaping, L.L.C. 8:29 a.m. EST November 22, 2016



Celebration of impact of Horticultural Therapy on life of Oldwick Senior at Melick's Town Farm (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

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I recently had the privilege of talking with New Jersey Department of Agriculture Assistant Secretary Alfred Murray about some of the innovations he has seen over the past 33 years in the field of agriculture.

The NJDA has long been an innovative agency with knowledgeable, dedicated individuals; it's currently led by Secretary of Agriculture, Douglas H. Fisher. Since joining the department, Murray has served three secretaries of agriculture: Arthur R. Brown Jr., the late Charles Kuperus, and Fisher.

As Murray wraps up his 33-year career with the NJDA, he said that he has witnessed many changes and forms of agriculture since 1983.

For him, one of the most unique is horticultural therapy. The therapeutic practice of gardening has proven to have significant physical, social and cognitive benefits, and has been specialized in the field of horticultural therapy. His support and contribution to the field is invaluable. He is a dear friend to me and, most significantly, the field of horticultural therapy (HT).



Art Brown, Former NJ Secretary of Agriculture, Mary Bullock, former President of the NJ State Board of Agriculture, NJ Secretary of Agriculture Doug Fisher, Paul Hlubik, State Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency, Laura DePrado, Final Touch Landscaping, LLC., Al Murray, Assistant Secretary of the NJ Department of Agriculture, and Joe Maugeri, President of the Vegetable Growers Association of NJ at the 2016 Jersey Fresh Eastern Produce Dinner held at Demarest Farms in Hillsdale, NJ ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado

We met eight years ago through a mutual acquaintance, a publisher of a horticulture and agriculture industry newspaper who took a strong interest in HT and asked me to start a column. The publisher introduced us. Until then the field of horticultural therapy was pretty much unknown to the NJDA.

This introduction was the seed that planted awareness about the field to Murray and Fisher, who became and enthusiastic supporters.

The NJDA lent its assistance to help spread the HT message, and connect to related nursery and greenhouse growers. My relationship with Murray and the NJDA grew over the years to the point where the department worked with me to bring the subject of HT to the entire New Jersey agriculture community through a resolution, which made HT a mainstream topic starting in 2013 with the passing of this resolution at the 98th State Agricultural Convention.

The convention is comprised of more than 150 delegates representing all facets of New Jersey agriculture. "It was apparent after the introduction that Laura's passion for HT, and through her passion, knowledge and dedication, the department couldn't help but join the journey," Murray said at the time.



New Jersey Department of Agriculture visit to the Adult Day Center of Somerset County with Senator Kip Bateman, New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association and ADC staff. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

"The reputation that our nursery, sod and greenhouse industry has helped boost awareness of HT," Murray said. "It is because of the diversity of floricultural products that can be used in application in HT."

New Jersey became the first state in the nation to designate the third week of March as Horticultural Therapy Week.

"We had no idea what HT was, and when we learned what it was, it presented a great opportunity for our growers, but more importantly the exposure and appreciation of agriculture" that is helping people, Murray said.

"It's exciting to be on the "ground field" because the field of HT is in its infancy, and there are so many ways of germination. When I started 33 years ago fruits and vegetables were the number one sector in agriculture. Nursery, horticultural and sod has taken the lead. It's exciting to be part of an undertaking to help shape a 'movement' that will help countless people," he added.



Celebration of Horticultural Therapy Week with dignitaries and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture at New Jersey Firemen's Home. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

Dr. Benjamin Rush, the “Father of Psychiatry,” signer of the Declaration of Independence and University of Pennsylvania professor. published his discovery in 1812 that patients with mania who worked in gardens had better recovery rates than those who did not. Horticultural therapy became a recognized professional field in 1973 with the inception of the American Horticultural Therapy Association.

The association is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting the practice of horticultural therapy as a dynamic human services modality.

Murray, a resident of Audubon, served as mayor of that community from May 1989 to May 1997. He joined the NJDA in October 1983 at the age of 21 as a marketing specialist. He was named bureau chief of the department’s Bureau of Market Expansion in 1995, and director of the Division of Markets in 2000. He added the title assistant secretary of agriculture in 2007.



Horticultural Therapy Week at the Statehouse with dignitaries and New Jersey Department of Agriculture. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

One of Murray's most notable accomplishments is that of "Jersey Fresh" program, which met with immediate success within the Garden State and which has been subsequently adopted in various iterations in states throughout the country.

Matthew Wichrowski, clinical assistant professor, Rusk Rehabilitation NYU School of Medicine, said, "Horticultural therapy has many applications within the area of allied health yet it is still vying for recognition and acceptance. Mr. Murray's efforts have raised awareness of the practice of HT and the many potential benefits it can provide. His work in this area is greatly appreciated by those who work in and benefit from the practice of horticultural therapy,"

Murray noted at the end of our interview: "People benefiting from horticultural therapy think they are taking care of plants, but (in reality) plants through horticultural therapists, are taking care of people."

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