



## Horticultural Therapy: The winter garden is calling

Laura DePrado, Final Touch Plantscaping, L.L.C. 12:02 p.m. ET Jan. 16, 2017

*Horticultural therapy uses gardening and plant-related activities in professionally conducted programs to improve people's physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning.*



**The winter garden is here. All that it holds is alive and dynamic. It's full of wonder, inspiration, possibilities, promise and hope about the garden and spring to come.** (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

It's January 2017. Happy New Year from my mobile office (the kitchen table), which looks out to the backyard and gardens I am watching the first snowfall and distracted and exhilarated by the view.

Large snowflakes are falling in every direction and landing perfectly blanketing everything in their path to create a white, puffy covering. Brilliant red, northern cardinals, and their mates and countless doves, robins, sparrows, nuthatches, feed on homemade suets in the garden. The red-bellied woodpecker pecks away at the bark of the plum tree while a northern cardinal sings and waits his turn at the bird feeder. Large sunflower seed shells fall from feeders as birds split them open and toss them to the ground.

If you listen you can hear “ping” as they land on the frozen snow — acapella nature’s way.

Countless birds are perched on the woody stems of lilac, giant golden and dormant hydrangea flowers, and the frosted, yet silky and feathery plumes of ornamental grasses and dormant stems of perennials that I never had the chance to cut back. They fly out of the shrubs, land on the frozen birdbaths, wind wheels, snow-covered gazebo roof top and railings, pansies, carnations, asters and Celosia in baskets and flower pots frozen in time on the deck. A red-tailed hawk stalks its prey from atop of a hollow tree defeated in Hurricane Sandy. A large cedar tree leans to the right not ready to fall and surrender its place in the landscape.

The winter garden is here.

All that it holds is alive and dynamic. It’s full of wonder, inspiration, possibilities, promise and hope about the garden and spring to come. The view leaves me full of distraction from pain from two major operations this past month. My mobility is greatly limited. I am a patient. I am a brain tumor survivor, deaf in one ear and a professional horticultural therapist. “Patient heal thyself.”



Northern Cardinal perched on dormant perennial stems waiting his turn at the suet in the backyard. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

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A horticultural therapist uses plants and the natural world to promote healing in a non-threatening environment. We work with other therapists and medical professionals to meet an individual's care plan and develop and customize programs to help achieve specific treatment goals. Horticultural therapy uses gardening and plant-related activities in professionally conducted programs to improve people's physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning. New Jersey is the first in the nation to designate the third week of March as "Horticultural Therapy Week."

Recent research proves there are measurable and significant psychological and physiological effects on individuals as they interact with plants. In such diverse fields as medicine, psychology and horticulture, it is accepted that flowers stimulate more than just our senses of sight and smell. The late Dr. Richard Mattson, director of horticultural therapy at Kansas State University said, "Research on the people-plant connection has yielded only positive results no matter if the plant life is a single flower on a desk or a group of trees in a botanic garden."

Research has backed up something humans know intuitively: Nature heals. Dr. Roger Ulrich of Texas A&M University, has done many studies that prove the benefits of horticulture for patients in medical facilities.

One of his well-known studies compared patients who were recovering from gallbladder surgery. Patients with a view of trees had fewer complications, shorter post-operative stays, and needed less pain medication than those who had only a view of a brick wall. Have you taken a moment to view the winter garden from your window wherever you may be, or helped someone who can't get to a window see the view? What makes you respond to a bird, a plant, a moment in time unfolding? Perhaps it is the sight, the smell, the touch, the sound, or the taste.



A Nuthatch balances on the tip of dormant Rose of Sharon branch waiting for mate to come back home. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

There are five ways to experience a garden no matter the season, since our response and experience is based on any or all of the five senses.

Let's start with sight. Sight is the most frequently used of the senses. Color is the first to grab our attention. Colors of course convey a "sense" of their own. As we age our ability to detect past and pale colors diminishes. Contrast colors compensate. For example, blues, green, purple with bright reds, yellow and oranges. Naturally most people think of flowers when they think of color in the garden. However, birds, ornamental structures, leaves, needles, bark and branches of plants can provide interesting color and texture that last throughout the season. Some true foliage favorites I use in activities indoors this time of year for horticultural therapy programs include pink polka dot plant, dracaena, Christmas cactus, Philodendrum, (also known as the Hope Plant), Amaryllis and a variety of plant plugs of Begonias, Cyclamen, and Primrose from New Jersey growers. Red and yellow red twig dogwoods are great for forcing to bud and bloom indoors. Winterberry Holly and many evergreens offer an endless supply of cuttings for arranging in isolation or with combined with other flowers anytime.

There are many plants that are fragrant and appeal to our sense of smell. Smell is often overlooked as a garden pleasure, yet it is our most primitive of senses. It is also the last of the senses to become impaired as we naturally age. Smell can trigger a flood of long-forgotten memories simply by sniffing a fragrance you encountered as a child. Some plants naturally fill the air with perfume as with many rose types, carnations, lavender, thyme, rosemary, and sage. In many instances, fragrance is strong and profuse when plant stems and/or leaves are rubbed or snapped.

One of the most enjoyable ways to experience a plant or plants during horticultural therapy activities or in a garden is through touch. Consider these textures: Fleshy, soft and smooth, papery, spikey, rough, waxy, leathery, velvety, and silky. Have you ever closed your eyes and run your fingers along a begonia leaf, or stroked the soft spikes of asparagus or tree fern, or felt the leaves of Cuban oregano? Mix up a homemade suet and use your hands to "stir" the ingredients together. There is nothing like play using the sense of touch. Sticky fun that washes clean in an instant. The birds will enjoy the delight and find their way to thank you. Wandering Jew, begonias, Purple Heart, Plectranthus, and Coleus are great for use.

Plants in the winter garden used for horticultural therapy activities stimulate sense of sound. Sound orientates us to the season. For example cardinals singing, wood peckers pecking, birds feeding, seeds and seed pods dropping on frozen ground, wind chimes hanging, or loose tree bark slapping and flapping. Sounds are critical to anyone visually impaired as sound provides location cues.

Lastly, but certainly not least, is the sense of taste. There is nothing like the satisfying reward of delighting and tantalizing the taste buds with a variety of cold crop lettuces and kales planted from seed during the cold months. We have four types of tastes, sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Plant enthusiasts devote their entire landscape (and planning of it during the winter), to combing through seed catalogs selecting edible plants of vegetables, herbs, flowers and fruits. I dried Chocolate Mint grown from seed this summer and participants create tea sacks during fall and winter programs.

Plants used in horticultural therapy activities and garden settings no matter the size, can provide an unlimited experience, restoration and rehabilitation any time of year. A trained horticultural therapist knows how to customize

the plants, the activities, and plan the therapeutic garden space for maximum benefit to engage the senses. My recovery and happiness is being harvested from a view from a window.

“Patient is healing thysself as the garden calls.”

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