



Green Fingers and Smiling Eyes: Its Horticultural Therapy Week in the Garden State

Laura DePrado, Community Contributor 10:00 a.m. ET March 19, 2017



March 19 to 25 is Horticultural Therapy Week in the Garden State. Earlier this year, the Somerset County freeholders issued a proclamation celebrating the week. Members of the county government and local horticultural therapy practitioners gathered to celebrate the proclamation. (Photo: ~Photo courtesy Somerset County Public Information Office)

Horticultural therapy programs offer cognitive, social and physical benefits with year-round application indoors and outdoors

Collette has a traumatic brain injury. She created a terrarium, a garden in a jar, at her own pace in horticultural therapy session in a rehabilitative setting.

Paul is new to adult day care. During his first month he was sad, and felt socially isolated, so he didn't speak. But then he participated in a horticultural therapy activity. He engaged with the plant material and project at hand. He started singing, and connecting to people.

Lillian is deaf, blind and in a wheel chair sitting in the corner while a horticultural therapy session was taking place around a large table with 20 elders in long-term care. Everyone was engaged in creative expression with assorted herbs. Then I brought her two herbs, one at a time. First, she smelled the basil leaves. She pushed my hand away as she did not like the smell of basil. I placed sage under her nose. She cupped the leaves in both hands, excited by the smell. She motioned to give her more. I placed another fuzzy, soft leaf in her hand. She smiled with joy through her frail body.

Dave, having suffered a stroke, was wheeled into to the activities room to participate in horticultural therapy. He wept uncontrollably. fully aware of his circumstance. I placed a flower under his nose. He stopped crying. He pointed to a vase on the table and motioned me to bring it closer. He placed the flower in the vase, and repeated the action until the vase was blooming with flowers.

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Through horticultural therapy, I've seen caregivers, clinicians, directors of nursing, medical directors, directors of facilities and maintenance engage with patients/clients and experience and report a relief from stress, and have enhanced and fun interaction with participants.

New Jersey, the Garden State, is the first in the nation to formally designate "Horticultural Therapy Week," which is the third week of March to coincide with the beginning of spring. This year it runs from March 19 to 25.

The week was established by Congress in 2006.

"Designating a week each year to raise awareness of Horticultural Therapy is expanding opportunities for more people to take advantage of the many benefits it offers," said Christopher "Kip" Bateman (R-16 Somerset, Hunterdon, Middlesex and Mercer). "Horticultural Therapy is a time proven practice dating back centuries that's helped countless people from children to seniors to veterans to those with special needs. I hope this week in March will now be filled with many events highlighting the importance and value of horticultural therapy."

Bateman's fellow 16th District Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli also acknowledged the expanding role horticultural therapy plays in the community.

"People do benefit from plants passively and actively, and no one should be denied the benefits of working with, growing and harvesting plants," he said. "It is altogether fitting "Horticultural Therapy Week" this third week of March be designated and celebrated as horticultural therapy brings meaningful activities for children through seniors in the Garden State."

PHOTOS: Horticultural Therapy Week in the Garden State

New Jersey is the first in the nation to formally designate "Horticultural Therapy Week" March 19th to 25th the third week of March to coincide with the beginning of spring. ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado





Eyes smile and fingers are green every day across the Garden State because of horticultural therapy programs which offer cognitive, social and physical benefits with year-round application indoors and outdoors. Settings include schools, senior and community centers, adult daycare, assisted living, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, hospitals including veterans, vocational schools, substance abuse rehabilitation, family shelters and resource centers, developmentally disabled day programs and group homes, day and residential housing for adults with autism, community and county parks, gardens and arboreta.

Horticultural therapists are typically part of a treatment team. Treatment teams vary depending on the client and the setting. In a clinical setting, for example, the team could consist of a clinical or medical director, a counselor or a social worker. In a rehabilitative setting the team might consist of a doctor, orthopedic, a nurse, an occupational or speech therapist, social worker or counselor. In a vocational setting the team could consist of vocational counselor, social worker, teacher and employer.

Research-based evidence shows the physical, psychological, social and cognitive benefits of horticultural therapy under the direction of a horticultural therapist, who is trained and skilled at creating customized activities, and/or garden spaces that accommodate people with a wide range of abilities (with goals, objectives and recorded outcomes). Horticultural therapists are trained to use plants and the cycles of nature to teach life skills. Nature and plant life cycles have built-in and unending benefit to people. In working with clients, therapists explain and implement social and psychological concepts. Concepts like nurturing, responsibility, the importance of strong "roots" and the value of rejuvenation. Horticultural Therapy brings dignity and enhanced skills through vocational, social and therapeutic programs and successfully enables and empowers individuals to achieve their maximum independence.

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Growing a garden and working with plants provides many benefits to people, such as physical activity, focusing on a task and a sense of accomplishment," New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher said. "The department fully recognizes and supports the diverse settings in which horticultural therapy is utilized and the important connection it has to our Jersey Grown plants, flowers, shrubs and other decorative nursery products."

As part of the week's celebration, a display of the American Horticultural Therapy Association can be seen at the State Capitol this week in Goldfinch Square. The association is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting

and developing the practice of horticultural therapy as a unique and dynamic human service modality. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the association, formed in 1973, advocates on behalf of the professional interests of horticultural therapy practitioners and strives to increase beneficial outcomes for participants, host facilities, researchers, and educators.

"The designation of a week in March to increase awareness about a time proven practice that helps people of all ages and all walks of life in a wide variety of settings makes sense," Somerville Mayor Brian Gallagher said.

Horticultural therapy was practiced by Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and founding member of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. He attended the College of New Jersey, (now known as Princeton University), and graduated from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He advocated for the humane treatment of mentally ill patients and is considered the "Father" of American Psychiatry."

Rutgers University offers an accredited degree and certificate program in horticultural therapy. Joel Flagler, professor of Horticultural Therapy, Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Science, Agricultural Agent Bergen County said, "The people-plant connection has never shown more potential and promise than it does today. The real excitement is that we are finally learning to recognize and utilize plants and the natural environment for improved mental and physiological health, much as our knowledge of the plant's role in medicine and nutrition has led to improved physical health."

Donald Kobayashi, professor of Plant Biology and the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey said that he is proud of the accomplishments of the horticultural therapy program at Rutgers University.

"We have witnessed substantial growth of the program over the past few years, including rising interest in student training, and broadened awareness of HT among potential clientele groups. The department will continue to provide support to HT at SEBS, with hopes of bringing the program to a new level."

To learn more about AHTA, go to ahta.org; to learn about the history and practical application of horticultural therapy, "Enabling Gardens: The Practical Side of Horticultural Therapy," read <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/fs1208/>.

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