



Winter plants a warm holiday welcome in horticultural therapy

Laura DePrado, Community Contributor Published 12:00 p.m. ET Dec. 18, 2017

The landscape is frozen in time as winter blankets trees, shrubs, perennials asleep until next spring. The garden is all but forgotten, but some plants are truly at their best this time of year with colorful foliage, and stems that make great materials for horticultural activities and learning in programs of horticultural therapy in the Garden State.

Horticultural therapy is the process of using plants as tools for rehabilitation of an individual or group through activities and projects that are guided by a horticultural therapist in purpose and meaning for the participants.

Horticultural therapists are providing services in settings such as rehabilitative centers, senior facilities, mental health centers, schools, residential facilities, addiction treatments, correctional facilities, Veterans hospitals and skilled nursing facilities and libraries in programs of special needs social hour for adults with disabilities. The focus is always on the population served using seasonally related plant materials.



A greenhouse or outdoor garden is not required for a horticultural therapy program. The focus is always on the population served using seasonally-related plant materials. This month, one activity for three different populations is the creation of holiday ornaments. The populations are Memory Care, adults with dementia, Adult outpatient group with mental health and substance abuse issues, and a group of fourth through 6th grade students in after school prevention program for youth at risk in a garden club. The activity offered fun, connection, curiosity, socialization for all of the participants and meaningful connection expressed in different ways. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

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This month, one activity I planned for three different populations is the creation of holiday ornaments. The populations are Memory Care, adults with dementia with medical complications, and adult outpatient group with mental health and substance abuse issues, and a group of fourth- through sixth-grade students in after-school prevention program for youth at risk in a garden club. The activity offered fun, connection, curiosity, socialization for all of the participants and meaningful connection, expressed in different ways.

Let's start with the Memory Care participants in long-term care at Atrium Post Acute Care Princeton. The goals were to stimulate the senses, and provide social connection while creating and completing the project of an ornament with and without assistance. The Horticultural therapy session took place in a room with a view of the winter landscape through a large window.

There were seven participants ages 60 and older. Staff support included the assistant director of activities, and myself. I used the view of trees, shrubs, and frozen landscape outside to help participants identify the season (winter), with the activity for which we would create an ornament using plant materials found in the landscape in winter. Materials were shown, offered, and passed one at a time to allow each member to respond, connect, and be successful at completing each single step task toward creating and completing an ornament.



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Materials included a clear plastic oblong-shaped ornament the size of an old perfume bottle, to allow all participants to hold comfortably while creating and handling plant materials. Materials included potpourri of rose petals, carnation flowers, Baby's Breathe, tree bark cut in small pieces, cut evergreens, dried and harvested hydrangea flowers and lavender. The first material offered was dried and harvested Lavender from my garden followed by the potpourri.

It was passed to all of the participants to engage and awaken their senses. The next item offered was a brightly colored bell to jingle. All seven participants immediately jingled their bells and recognized winter and that the holidays are here.

One member started singing "Jingle Bells Jingle Bells..." while others joined in. Smiles, laughter, cooperation and working independently and with assistance, and together bloomed.



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Next, they inserted the bells in their ornament followed by fresh cut evergreens of Arborvitae. “It smells like Christmas,” shared one member. Next, participants received artificial snow and shredded pieces of shiny silver paper to place in their ornaments. Lastly, they placed one large snow flake sticker to the outside of the ornament, and placed the silver cap on top with a piece of gold and white string tied with assistance.

“I am going to give this to my daughter,” said one member. “Look how beautiful,” added another member. Each participant held up their ornament to show what they created. They complimented one another, and were so proud!

The second group was the Adult outpatient group that I work with for one hour every Friday in private setting at Anew Wellness in Somerset. I am part of a treatment team of clinicians and medical director, a physician. This group consisted of 12 adults who gathered at a round table in a brightly lit room with a view outside. The goals are vocational and a path to wellness, while creating and completing multiple steps and complex tasks toward creating an ornament. The ornament offered for this group was round, and about the size of a softball.

As participants selected their materials (evergreens, tree bark, dried and harvested lavender and hydrangea, white pine, potpourri, artificial snow and shredded silver paper), they engaged, and talked with each other. They asked questions about the plant materials, and shared horticulture, vocation, relationships, successes and failures. Participants performed more complex tasks using the materials. For example, they threaded ribbon through the bells and attached to the outside of the silver cap.

They used different shaped and sized snow flake stickers, ribbons, decorative rolls of tape as decorations to mount on the outside and placed on the inside. They cut tree bark, evergreen stems, dried hydrangea flowers, and harvested lavender. One participant shared, “I am going to Florida to visit my parents, and every year we have an ornament exchange. This year, I made one, and it’s so beautiful. You can’t buy this.”

All participant made more than one. “I will give each of my grandchildren an ornament and keep one or myself,” said a client, while another participant shared, “My ornaments will be given as gifts. I have not had the energy to think about getting gifts. This lifts my burden.”

The third group was fourth- through sixth-grade students in a one-hour after school program with Middle Earth 21 Century CCLC, in prevention for youth at risk known as the Garden Club at the Smalley School in Bound Brook. The goals are to introduce students to horticulture, learning, and positive social connections while creating an ornament a little smaller than a baseball. I am part of a team comprised of counselors and high school mentors.

The students I work with in the Garden Club have gathered in a classroom every Monday since September. Given that they are required to sit at a desk all day long, I encouraged them to gather in the back of the room and take a seat at the table, or on the floor to create a circle.

I passed out plant materials starting with assorted evergreens from trees, and shrubs, bark, dried and harvested hydrangea flowers and lavender. We had a show and share of horticulture learning as the students handled the materials. Next, I gave them the option of selecting any materials they wished to create holiday ornaments.

They took turns collecting their materials of choice, and worked in groups, and individually. They shared materials. Each cleaned their station before they left. "Thank you Miss Laura. We can't wait until next Monday. Can we make arrangements? Make sure you bring more potpourri and lavender too!"

Coming in January 2018, an interview with National Garden Bureau Executive Director Diane Blazek. National Garden Bureau is a 99-year-old non-profit organization that promotes the hobby of gardening in many ways, including giving grants to therapeutic gardens.

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