

AHTA MAGAZINE

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In This Issue

- AHTA 2018 Annual Conference Pre-Tour Highlights
- Horticultural Therapy in Taiwan: A Cultural & Culinary Experience



HTR Profile
Laura DePrado, HTR
Page 5

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Editor: René Malone, MS, CTRS, HTR

CONTENTS

Editor's Words	3
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FEATURES

2018 AHTA Conference Denver Pre-tours Highlights	4
HTR Profile Laura DePrado	5
Horticultural Therapy in Taipei, Taiwan: A Cultural and Culinary Experience	7

PLOWING FIELDS

2018 National Children and Youth Garden Symposium	10
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PROMOTING RESEARCH

Understanding Motivations for Gardening Using a Qualitative General Inductive Approach	11
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PROGRAMS

A Haven of Greenspace — Horticulture Therapy in Liverpool, United Kingdom	12
Horticultural Therapy Sensory Activity	14
The Texture of Living Plants	15

RESOURCES

Book Review	16
Education and Training	17
Rutgers University Internship Programs: Planting Seeds for the Future	17
Chicago Botanic Garden Horticultural Therapy Certificate	17
An Idea Comes Full Circle: the Japanese Garden and Horticultural Therapy	18
Member Benefits	20

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Editor's Words

Happy Summer AHTA members!

Many of us are experiencing the height of color and produce in our therapy gardens as well as our own backyard. Here, in the Midwest, our season has been relatively mild and quite generous with rainfall. I am aware many of you are experiencing unfortunate extremes in heat and rain, with the raging fires in California among the worst.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the AHTA magazine. Our conference will be here soon and I hope to see many of you in Denver! Enjoy the descriptions and photos from our busy pre-tour lineup occurring October 4th. Members will have two options this year and this looks to be a real treat! I truly had a life-changing experience in Taiwan and wanted to share some highlights from this small country that

is making big headway in our profession. Our horticultural therapist profile featuring Laura DePrado will inspire and motivate you.

A final note: in an effort to reduce the work load of our already strapped volunteer work team, next year we will be moving to producing three issues but with more pages. Also, I will be stepping down as Editor as I go off the board this fall. Thankfully, Debra Edwards, new board member will be stepping up to replace me. Debra's bubbly personality and experience in horticultural therapy will be a true asset to our field. If you're attending the conference, please make an effort to welcome her and introduce yourself! 🌱



Photo Credit: Kate Bodin, MEd. HTR

HTR Profile:

Laura DePrado, HTR

Interviewed by: René Malone

■ Tell us about your background and education.



Horticulture Technology.

B.S. University of Northern Texas, Print and Broadcast Journalism and Political Science, Horticultural Therapy Certificate from Rutgers University, and became a registered horticultural therapist in May 2011. I also have 23 credits for Greenhouse Management and Commercial Greenhouse Production County from the College of Morris Landscape

■ How did you discover the field of horticultural therapy?

News reporter...that was me. I had a gift to write since I was five years old. I enjoyed an incredible and wonderful career as a news reporter. I went to college on a partial scholarship for Journalism and graduated with a double major in Broadcasting and News Journalism. I was a news reporter, and that was all I could see myself doing. Upon graduating I landed my first job as a reporter for a publishing company. I covered everyday beats for the local township, board meetings, and other events; wrote obituaries, biographies, news stories and the like. Ultimately, I was given a story that came across my news desk on a paper napkin about commercial aircraft noise over central New Jersey that I was asked to investigate. The subject and subsequent birth and growth of a grass roots group fighting the Federal Aviation Administration against jet noise and route change would become my beat and would ultimately land on the cover of the New York Times for succeeding in changing commercial aircraft routes.

As a reporter I covered many beats and stories of human interest and investigation. This was my passion and gift. I wanted to be a broadcast journalist, but God had other plans and used my second passion for fitness and wellness to become a corporate fitness specialist and exercise trainer. I worked with thousands of employees throughout the Garden State inspiring corporate employees to transform their lives. However, although I was passionate about my career, my feet sustained repetitive fractures, and I was forced to leave the field.

While working as a fitness consultant I met my husband, fell madly in love and had two kids. I enjoyed being a stay at home mother, but I needed an outlet for my creativity. I decided to run an ad in the newspaper for a home care professional. My proposed job duties would include cooking, errands, light gar-

dening, etc. After running the ad for only one day, I received 20 phone calls! Four of those families became my first clients.

Three months into my new "entrepreneurial" job, a gardener was born. I was working as a home care professional on a spectacular four-acre estate when the owner asked me to beautify her outdoor space. Since I had no experience with landscape gardening, I lived and breathed the classroom, devouring as much information on the subject as I could find. I was on a quest to find the most exquisite materials – plants, flowers, and other accessories – that would tell stories from place to place and space to space.

I always say that my first experience in gardening was "priceless" because I truly had an unlimited budget. Together the client and I developed a plan that would transform her property into a personal oasis. We purchased \$100,000 in perennials, ornamental shrubs and trees. The sky was the limit and my creativity soared. I found that I instinctively had a knack for blending colors, textures, shapes, and sizes to create a cohesive, inviting look. I paid special attention to how the property would grow and change over time. After all, this was a huge investment and I wanted to ensure it would be beautiful and easy to maintain for many years to come.

For the next six and a half years, I was the personal gardener for the estate. A half-acre had been cleared beyond the yard for a garden. Working closely with landscapers, farmers, growers, nurseries, and retail garden stores, my vision came to life. I negotiated contracts, managed installations, and learned as much as I could from lawn technicians, arborists, excavators, and drainage experts. That first client referred me to several neighbors and I began embellishing properties in Tewksbury, New Vernon and Far Hills. One client nicknamed me "The Finishing Touch" because I added that "something extra" to a landscape to personalize it for the client.

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Adult Day Center of Somerset County (ADC) located in Bridgewater, NJ at Raised Table Planter with wheels and brakes used year-round. The Adult Day Center, a non-profit adult day care, serves 80 older adults daily many of whom have an Alzheimer's or dementia diagnosis. (Photo Courtesy of the Adult Day Center of Somerset County)

I will never forget the pivotal day that drove me to horticultural therapy. I planted a climbing yellow rose bush for the wrought iron arbor that marked the entrance to a new garden space. My client was touched and speechless. Little did I know that yellow roses were her father's favorite flower. He had recently passed and she felt like a little piece of him was with her now. That was a defining moment that I could, once again, make a difference in someone's life, not with fitness, but with plants. I knew this was my calling. I returned to school to complete a horticultural therapy certificate from Rutgers University and become a registered horticultural therapist and, ultimately, an internship supervisor.

■ **What is your current work?**

Today, I am President and Owner of Final Touch Plantscaping, LLC, Branchburg, Somerset County NJ. I am a registered horticultural therapist, author, journalist and brain tumor survivor. I work at the Carrier Clinic with adults 18 years and older in the clinic's psychiatric, addiction and older adult units, the Atlantic Health System, an Adult Day Center in Somerset County, and other sub-acute, long term, and rehabilitative facilities. I facilitate corporate wellness Lunch-n-Learns, and provide consult time on many special projects in starting, expanding or revamping garden spaces for horticultural therapy programs.

■ **What is your greatest challenge and reward running your own business.**

In May 2008 I started my business, Final Touch Plantscaping. My greatest challenge is finding time and influencing change with horticultural therapy in politics. My greatest reward is impacting the human condition on the spectrum.

■ **What are some of your favorite plants.**

Depending on the time of year my favorites are lavender, hydrangea, star jasmine, roses, hibiscus, mint, spearmint, lemon thyme, lemon grass, lisianthus, carnations, baby's breath, sunflowers, sage, lantana, *Abelia grandiflora*, succulents, butterfly weed, *Phlox paniculata*, scented geranium, stock, basil, bulbs, lambs ear, crape myrtle flowers, and birch bark (used as paper for creating cards and art expressions).

■ **Do you accept interns?**

Yes! Internships are currently are affiliated with the facilities where I run horticultural therapy programs (nursing, OT, social work, PT, education and special education, and psychology departments).

■ **You've been a true leader in pushing for the recognition of HT in the NJ legislature. Can you share advice for other HTs to become involved in their states?**

Steps and resources are published in the Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture (Fall 2017) in my article titled "Raising Awareness of Horticultural Therapy with the Seed of "National Horticultural Therapy Week" and Roots of New Jersey Agriculture." I continue

to write many articles (see <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1208/> and follow me on LinkedIn). In addition, I took leadership roles in many influential organizations as follows:

NJ Agriculture Convention Delegate
NJ Farm Bureau Alternate Delegate Farm Bureau Convention
NJ Agricultural Society
Somerset County Board of Agriculture
Somerset County Business Partnership Ambassador, Legislative Committee, Sustainable Somerset Committee and Wellness Committee
Boy Scouts of America Scout Project Liaison
Rotary International

■ **Do you have personal perspectives to share with present or future horticultural therapists?**

Be passionate! Share your passion in the following ways-Write! Invite! Be Polite! Take Risks! Offer your expertise through a back door (if needed). Lead! Align yourselves with the trade associations in horticulture, farming, landscape contracting. Meet your legislators! Rely and use past history!! Read!! Don't wait for someone else to do IT! 🌱



Carrier Clinic news release from Belle Mead, N.J. Horticultural therapist Laura Ann DePrado displays plants at the site of a newly created therapy garden at Blake Recovery Center, a division of Carrier Clinic, as she is flanked by Michael Loch, left, director of fund development for Carrier Clinic, and Donald J. Parker, CEO & president of Carrier Clinic. DePrado, president of Final Touch Plantscaping, LLC, and a resident of Branchburg, is working in Carrier's adult psychiatric and addiction and older adult units in the first phase of a newly launched mobile cart therapeutic gardening program. Therapeutic gardening for patients is a part of Carrier's "healing and innovative alternative therapies," she said. (Photo credit: Carrier Clinic)