



November's garden offers cornucopia of plants for the senses

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The November landscape is rich with materials for a cornucopia of projects in purposeful and meaningful activities in horticultural therapy. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

November is here. We watch the colorful leaves fall from trees into piles on the ground to be raked laboriously to the curb or bagged for pick up. What remains of the woodland landscape are silhouettes of trees and shrubs with a color of evergreen trees that offer a view of green comfort.

By now, the finches have picked clean the seed heads of black-eyed Susan, Zinnia, and Echinacea. Canoe-shaped pods of milkweed with their silken thread weighted with small, dark seeds at the tip, are ready to let go and blow out into the wind. The warm temperatures that linger have allowed flowers like three-foot tall marigolds, calendula, cosmos, chamomile, lavender, and an assortment of herbs planted from seed last May to show their durable performance.

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Let me share some of them with you as these are activities throughout the month with universal appeal for the populations I work with in social, wellness, vocational and therapeutic programs, for people ages 12 to 90 in facilities such as adult day care, psychiatric, addiction and recovery, memory and rehabilitative care and workplace wellness. All activities are approved in advance by clinicians and recreational therapists.



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The first activity is exploring the wonders of milkweed (Asclepias) pods, the host plant for the monarch butterfly. The hard, brown seeds are attached to very soft, shimmering silken thread within the pod. These have quite a contrast in touch, and a great way to move the fingers to separate the seeds from the threads.

I encourage participants to make a wish and blow the silken threads and ask another to catch. Next, they collect the seeds and store them in a paper envelope for planting next spring in anticipation of things to come. I tell participants, "Gardening is enlightened experimentation. Give planting seeds a try."

Participants label the seeds and add a photo of a monarch butterfly. This activity offers familiarity of butterflies for everyone and encourages stewardship, horticulture learning, socialization, exploration, discovery and anticipation of tomorrow.

The second activity is a "feast for the senses," as clients describe. Participants explore flower and herb varieties for smell, taste, texture, and color.

An herb is defined as a non-woody plant that dies down to the ground after flowering. Historically the most important uses of herbs were medicinal. Examples of some of the herbs to create herb and olive oil mixes for culinary use, and also for harvesting and drying while stored in the paper tea pouch are lavender, mint, lemon thyme, lemongrass, lemon verbena, rosemary, sage, and basil.

Basil, mint and lavender are recognized by everyone in programs no matter the age, or circumstance. Participants who are non-verbal begin to talk and share their love of the herbs, how they cook with or used to cook with them, family gardening, stories of successes and challenges with recipes from their native countries and cultures, and socializing with others.

Watching the interaction is like watching a flower bloom in time lapse photography. As they tear the herbs of their choice into smaller pieces and place on their coffee filter "plate" participants will ask, "Do you have olive oil so we can create a mix?"

The finished product is a "scentational" mix of herbs and olive oil with crackers I offer for dipping. This activity offers instant gratification and reward. Participants decorate their cups with themed stickers and positive expressions. This activity creates a distraction, focus on tasks at hand, is fun, and creates mindfulness, being in the present, and has application for use again and again.

The third activity is composting flowers and herbs such as mint and lavender for aromatherapy tea pouches and teas. For adolescents I encourage participant volunteers to share baskets filled with flowers and herbs and distribute to others. Participants become alive and awakened by the assortment of colors, textures, and fragrances and sounds as they run their fingers exploring and collecting dried plant leaves, petals, and flowers to place in their tea pouch.

I offer an assortment of decals of positive expressions to decorate their pouches and stickers of seasonal themes such as pumpkins, birds, butterflies, lady bugs, and animals, for example. Clinicians in psychiatric hospital settings share that the aromatherapy pouches offer a way to calm and reduce agitation anxiety, irritability, and improve mood. Smells and reminiscences offered by plants are a cornucopia harvest.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Laura DePrado is a registered horticultural therapist, and president of Final Touch Landscaping, LLC.