

## Horticultural Therapy

*by Beth Bruno, Life Enrichment Centers Adult Day Health Care*

The horticultural therapy program at [Life Enrichment Center Adult Day Health Care](#) has been going strong for 4 years. It began as my internship during the final semester of my year-long certificate program with the [Horticultural Therapy Institute](#). When I completed my internship I submitted a program proposal to the executive director and she hired me to be the full-time horticultural therapist.



The first thing I did was get busy making the garden a place where we could engage with plants – and one another – in ways that are meaningful and enriching. We added several raised bed gardens with wide walkways for easy access. We planted a wildflower meadow, installed a butterfly garden, added a shady arbor as a gathering place, and created water gardens on the patios. The participants are involved in every aspect of raising the flowers and vegetables in our gardens, from choosing what we will grow, to starting the seeds, repotting, transplanting, fertilizing, watering, weeding, and ultimately, harvesting.

We have seen so many amazing things happen through connecting people with plants and nature. Many of our participants have been avid gardeners in their lifetime, and through circumstances beyond their control, have lost their ability to garden at this point in their lives. What we have discovered is that no matter how advanced their dementia, the hands and the heart do not forget what to do when offered a chance to dig in the soil. Planting and watering are tasks that are familiar and comforting, something many of them engaged in as a leisure activity in the past. Sometimes they spend more time watering the outside of the raised beds than the plants, but no matter, they are focused and occupied, doing real work, which makes them feel valuable and competent again.



I have found that gardening and gardens reconnect persons living with dementia to a part of themselves that seemed to have been lost forever. I remember one afternoon when a participant I will call “Bob” was agitated and restless and I gently guided him out into the garden for a walk. Bob had been unable to speak in intelligible sentences for some time. We began our walk and then came to a magnolia tree that was in full bloom. I encouraged Bob to lean over and smell the beautiful creamy blossom that was in front of us. When he did he got a faraway look in his eyes. He leaned over and inhaled again

and then, incredibly, spoke. He said “You know, my grandmother was a great gardener. I believe she could have set a rock on the ground and it would have grown.” To say I was stunned would be an understatement. My eyes welled up as I realized I had just witnessed a miracle. The fragrance of a magnolia blossom penetrated the depths of his heart to bring up this part of himself that was still there, even though it was veiled by his dementia. Since that day I have seen this same kind of miracle happen over and over again.

We had seen the power of the people-plant connection to create positive outcomes for people living with dementia. Because the winter months made it difficult for us to have



as great an impact, we decided we needed a greenhouse to enable us to continue offering the therapeutic benefits of horticulture to our participants. Having a greenhouse recaptured those *lost* months and gave us a warm, beckoning space which invited folks to relax and stay a while. We could continue our gardening and growing, our watering and getting our hands in the soil. What we were unprepared for is the overwhelming visceral response of the people who enter this magical space. Even the most agitated and anxious participants are visibly calmed and quieted when they come into this fragrant, life-filled garden room. There is a sense of wonder and awe, a shifting of attention to the present moment and the beauty that is all around them. There is an eagerness to participate in the work of creating this beautiful place through watering, planting seeds, and transplanting.

There is a sense of joy in the social aspect of working in cooperation with others. There are smiles, animated conversations, sharing memories of gardens past, and the pleasure of gardening. The greenhouse is truly magical and has become an important extension of our horticultural therapy program.

Being allowed to facilitate so many positive outcomes through gardening is richly rewarding. The need for people to reconnect to the natural world is great. My goal is to improve the quality of life for our participants by giving them every opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of plants and gardening. The sense of self-worth, confidence and control they feel as a result is the greatest harvest of all.

*Beth Bruno was a professional horticulturist for many years before making the people-plant connection through horticultural therapy. She holds an AAS in Horticultural Science and a certificate in Horticultural Therapy from the Horticultural Therapy Institute and Colorado State University. She is the full-time horticultural therapist for the Life Enrichment Centers Adult Day Health Care in Shelby and Kings Mountain, NC.*