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HORTICULTURAL THERAPY: Defining the difference between therapy practices

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In working and interacting with hundreds of people in the last five years, I have noticed a pre-concluded understanding, and therefore misunderstanding, about what horticultural therapy is and isn't. Because of the word "therapy," it is only logical that most people would consider that only special need or physically challenged individuals benefit from horticultural therapy.

So let's define horticultural therapy. It is the process and practice of using plants and gardens in human healing, rehabilitation and training. Do you see yourself as someone with no limitations and not considered part of special population (in the broad spectrum)? All of us function with limitations in mind, body, and spirit, whether it is temporary or permanent at any stage of life. The difference is only a matter of degree.

Working with plants in your garden no matter its size has benefits. You may refer to it as your therapy. Horticultural therapy involves customized activities and programs with treatment goals and objectives under the direction of a trained and credentialed horticultural therapist. Horticultural therapy defines specific goals and objectives for an individual or group.

What separates it from other types of garden interactions is the presence of clients, goals, treatment activities that are customized with modifications and adaptations.

A trained horticultural therapist is responsible for planning treatment, developing sessions, interactions with clients and recording outcomes as part of the treatment plan for a client's benefit. Horticultural therapy work can be done alone or as part of treatment team that may include a social worker, counselor, occupational, physical, speech or recreational therapist. It can be used in a variety of settings, including hospitals, senior centers, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, adult day care, rehabilitation, substance abuse rehabilitation, vocational schools, correctional facilities, programs and group homes, day and residential housing for autistic adults, community and county gardens and arboreta.

Horticultural therapy practitioners use a variety of methods to achieve results: sensory-stimulating environments with plants selected for fragrance, texture and color. The use of greenhouses for year-round activities and programs, accessible entrances and paths in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act regulations; adaptable work spaces, table trays which raise and lower, and adaptive tools and devices and raised beds of varying heights and widths for example.

Garden, or plant "therapy" and horticulture lessons and activities both planned and unplanned can stimulate some, or all the senses. Your eyes are stimulated by the beauty of colors and shapes year round, your ears by the sound of birds, bees, and water, the sense of smell from fresh herbs, fresh cut winter holiday trees and garlands for example. The presence of plants through winter, spring, summer and fall can divert your thoughts about yourself and your situation. Instead you can concentrate on taking care of the plants, which have a very subtle way of thanking you, the gardener. Plants respond to our care. We respond to plants. Plants respond to life cycles in nature. We respond to the natural rhythms and the cycles of life.

There are many physical benefits to be had from gardening. First, gardening includes a wide range of activities that the various muscle groups can be readily exercised. Fine and gross motor skills are developed whether you are planting seeds or digging up a big area of land as your body are involved in movements that stretch and strengthen the muscles and joints. Your coordination, stamina and flexibility can also be improved. Your eyes are being exercised too as you practice spatial relationships and hand-eye coordination while you garden?

Another benefit from gardening is the emotional/psychological benefit of improved self-esteem. Do you feel a sense of pride when you plan and complete a project. It can be as simple planting a seed and having it germinate. The plants in your garden are dependent on you the gardener. You can enhance your self-confidence and

independence by being responsible for their care. Gardening is also a great way to relieve stress or feelings of anger or aggression. Gardening allows you to become more connected to nature which in turn enhances your state of mind, or mental health.

Gardening also has social benefits. How many people do you know who share your interest in plants and gardening activities? Gardening provides a common ground and breaks through barriers. Plants and gardening can lead you to places and people sharing stories, experiences and memories. It is full of wonder and surprise. No matter where you go people need plants and plants need people.

Lastly, there is the intellectual benefit. It doesn't matter your age, your education, your profession, or whether you are a beginner or advanced gardener of many years. There is always something to learn and explore. When was the last time you observed something in your "garden" whether it be a sense of wonder, play or experimentation? Consider all of the above exercise for your brain, stimulating your intellect.

Horticultural Therapy is a practice with value and benefits that reach human healing and rehabilitation far beyond what you experience in garden, plant "therapy" and horticultural lessons. Documented research will be discussed in future articles.

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