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People-plant connections can aid in health recovery, well-being

Written by
Laura DePrado

Horticultural therapy is the process where plants are used as tools for rehabilitation of an individual, or group, with specific goals and objectives and procedures through creative activities and projects that provide sensory stimulation, under the direction of a Horticultural Therapist.

The horticultural therapist records outcomes and results and makes necessary changes and adaptations to treatment plans to ensure client, or patient success.

Plants have unique qualities as they respond to any caregiver — plants do not judge. They do not discriminate and they are universally appealing. Plants grow and change as well as help stimulate the senses, encourage participation, and offer opportunities to rediscover hope (a look into the future).

Horticultural therapy (HT) is an emerging profession. It is recognized as a practical and viable treatment with wide-ranging benefits. A growing number of health-care facilities from hospitals to mental health institutions are embracing horticultural therapy that use gardening as part of their treatments run by horticultural therapists, who typically are part of a treatment team of occupational therapist, social worker, psychologist, physical, and/or recreation therapist.

Some of the settings where horticultural therapists are providing valuable and viable services include the following: Rehabilitative centers, senior facilities, hospitals and medical centers, residential facilities, parks and arboreta, community mental health centers, clinics, skilled nursing facilities, cancer centers, addiction treatment programs, public and private schools and health and wellness and correctional facilities and prisons. Horticultural therapy environments can be outdoors, indoors, or both. The American Horticultural Therapy Association is the only national organization with the mission to advance and promote the practice of horticultural therapy to improve human well-being.

The following are three examples of problems, goals and objectives appropriate for horticultural therapy and what differentiates it from “garden therapy.”

First, the “problem” is identified. The client or participant is unable to follow directions and needs to follow multi step directions in order to be eligible for employment. The horticultural therapist’s goal: The client will correctly repot geraniums 80 percent of the time, with staff support daily for one week. The objective: The client will correctly repot geraniums 80 percent of the time, using a cue sheet, daily for one week. First, the procedure: The staff will demonstrate the multi-step procedure. Second, using a cue card the staff will explain each step. Third, the client will work with staff reminders. Fourth, step three will be continued until the client has met the first Objective, which is to repot geraniums. Fifth, staff assistance will fade from the client, with cue cards used only when mistakes are made.

In the second example, the problem is that the client, or patient is depressed with poor self-esteem. The goal: The client will increase self-esteem by completing a project. The objective: He or she, will choose one small project and complete it daily. The procedure steps would be as follows: The staff will help the client or patient choose an appropriate project. With staff support the patient, or client will complete that project daily and the patient, or client will process feelings about being successful.

In the third example the patient has suffered a stroke and has poor use of left hand. The goal is that the patient will increase left-hand range of motion. As the objective the patient will dis bud seasonal flowers daily for 10 minutes without a break. As the procedure the staff will demonstrate correct method for dis budding flowers and assist patient for 10 minutes daily. In addition the staff will reduce the amount of assistance daily until the patient is working independently.

In each of the three examples, adaptations and adjustments can and will be made by the horticultural therapist. Garden volunteers can provide valuable support for horticultural therapists who develop treatment goals and objectives, based on problems identified, and deliver customized activities and record outcomes and progress.

There are endless opportunities for people-plant connections in human health and well-being. Horticultural Therapists are the link and the bridge to expanding existing garden and horticulture activities and programs because they are trained to implement and deliver meaningful and effective programs and activities for cognitive development, psychological improvement, physical improvement and social growth, interacting with others. Each of these will be discussed in detail along with the types of programs in upcoming articles.

**Laura DePrado is a horticultural therapy practitioner and horticultural specialist:
Laura@finaltouchplantscaping.com, or 908-872-8387.**