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The seven characteristics of a therapeutic garden

Written by
Laura DePrado

What makes a garden therapeutic? The basic features of a therapeutic garden can include wide and gently graded accessible entrances and paths, raised planting beds and containers, and a sensory-oriented plant selection focused on color, texture, and fragrance. A therapeutic garden is a plant-dominated environment specifically designed to facilitate interaction with the healing elements of nature either passively or actively depending on the garden design and users' needs.

There are many sub-types of therapeutic gardens including healing gardens, enabling gardens, rehabilitation gardens, and restorative gardens.

The seven therapeutic garden characteristics discussed here are adapted from the American Horticultural Therapy Association's Board of Directors, April 1995. The association, a 501(c) 3, established in 1973, has helped horticultural therapy gain acceptance as a unique and dynamic human service program. It is the only national US organization concerned with the promotion and development of horticultural therapy programming. Horticultural therapy is recognized as a practical and viable treatment with wide-ranging benefits for people in therapeutic, vocational and wellness programs. Horticultural therapists are trained to provide customized activities and programs, with goals, objectives and monitored outcomes, in a wide variety of settings that accommodate people with a wide range of abilities.

The association is celebrating its 40th anniversary conference “Honoring the Past: Envisioning the Future”, in Minneapolis, Minn., this month. I have the privilege of speaking about enabling gardens and serving on the National Conference Work Team. For more information go to ahta.org.

This article is intended to introduce, educate and promote the seven characteristics specifically used by therapeutic landscape architects and horticultural therapists in collaboration to address a variety of applications within healthcare, rehabilitative settings.

The first characteristic is scheduled and programmed activities. Rehabilitation therapies (PT, OT, SLP), use the garden to help meet patient clinical goals. A horticultural therapy program with the presence of a HT, and/or other therapy specialists guide and promote a program of activities and experiences in the garden. Independent activities and events can be designed into the garden program. The garden is available to client/patient therapy treatments, unstructured time, families, visitors, staff and in some settings, the community 24-7, year round.

The second is features modified to improve accessibility. Garden elements, features and equipment are all selected or modified to provide accessible places, activities and experiences to the greatest extent possible. Each modification to the therapeutic garden environment eases the task of gardening and, or enhances the horticultural experience to the visitor/gardener, enabling them to see and even study plants, to touch, or smell them, to encounter the luxuriant garden growth in their own way, on their own terms and at their own pace.

The third is well-defined perimeters. Edges of garden spaces and special zones of activities within the garden are often intensified to redirect the attention and the energies of the visitor to the components and displays within the garden.

The fourth, is a profusion of plants and people/plant interactions. Therapeutic gardens introduce individuals to planned, intensive outdoor environments in which the conscious provisions of spaces and places for restoration, horticulture education, therapy, and for social exchanges are organized into legible and verdant, plant-dominated open spaces with simple patterns of paths and workplaces. The garden promotes four seasons of sensory stimulation.

The fifth is benign and supportive conditions. Safe, secure and comfortable settings for people with the avoidance of potentially hazardous chemicals such as fertilizers and

insecticides, provision of shade and other protective structures, the flourishing of plants, and the protected and protective nature of the therapeutic garden in offering personal comfort and refuge to the garden user.

The sixth is universal design. The design is for the convenience and enjoyment for people with the widest possible range of conditions while stimulating the full range of the senses including memory, hearing, touch, smell and sometimes taste as pleasurable alternatives to the visual experience of gardens.

The seventh is recognizable place making. Therapeutic gardens are simple, unified and easily comprehended places. Place making is an important strategy in all landscape design efforts. It heightens the visitor's focus on plant-related sensuality, comfort, and independence experiences within a therapeutic garden.

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