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Horticultural Therapy: Caring for people and nature, a model of environmental stewardship

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Many changes occur as a person ages, impacting a person's physical, emotional and cognitive abilities, and social roles. Gardening can be used in a therapeutic way to address these issues and improve lives.

However, many of the changes involved in aging must be addressed by modifications in gardening practices, current situations and tools. This is where horticultural therapy can offer safe, physical, social, cognitive activities where horticultural therapists can customize, set goals and objectives, monitor outcomes and make changes as needed.

There are countless examples of a life change cause by aging, the impact of that change, and the gardening adaptation to allow for successful participation and connections for anyone at any stage of life.

All people at every age must have contact with nature and some form of outdoor recreation for a happy and healthful life. Assuring an opportunity for such essentials to future generations is a serious present day problem. No one should be denied the benefits of working with plants. Horticultural therapists are in the forefront and leading the way in the conservation movement, as they care for people and plants holistically. It is important that we are knowledgeable about ecology, sustainability and the conservation of land, water and energy.

Duke Farms in Hillsborough is leading the way in research and education about the land we live on. It serves as a model of environmental stewardship.

Duke Farms hosted the Mid-Atlantic Horticultural Therapy Network on Oct. 25, as 56 members representing five states — New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware — attended the 2013 annual conference “Caring For People, Caring for Nature” Horticultural Therapy and Environmental Stewardship event.

The network is the leading regional not-for-profit horticultural therapy organization, and this year’s conference participants included horticultural therapy students and members of allied therapies. The conference provided the organization an opportunity to fulfill its mission to promote awareness and acceptance of the professional practice of horticultural therapy through education, communication and networking.

In May 2012, Duke Farms, located on 2,750 acres, launched a new vision for the property, one of the largest privately-owned parcels of undeveloped land in the state. The mission is to inspire visitors to become informed stewards of the land.

Michael Catania, Duke Farms executive director, said this is the first time the site hosted a network event. “Partnerships will propel stewardship practices to the forefront of sustainability in the region,” he said.

The Mid-Atlantic Horticultural Therapy Network , and the national American Horticultural Therapy Association, a non-profit based in King of Prussia Pa., seek to promote awareness and acceptance of the professional practice of horticultural therapy. Both are seeking to grow partnerships and build bridges to allied partnerships across the nation. MaryAnne McMillan of Westfield, newly elected president of the national association, said one of the group’s goals is to reach out to allied professions.

“Horticultural therapists work with a team approach connecting with and impacting many audiences and populations,” she said. “In New Jersey, horticultural therapists work with children, special needs, youth at risk, aging, nursing home clients and patients (dealing with) substance abuse, mental health, traumatic brain injury post traumatic stress disorder, and neuromuscular, including cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis.”

For more information, visit MAHTN.org, or the American Horticultural Therapy Association website at ahta.org.

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