



As appeared in mycentraljersey.com November 16, 2015

'Tis the season for horticultural therapy

Laura DePrado, Final Touch Plantscaping 12 p.m. EST November 16, 2015

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**Dr. Ulrich is Professor of Architecture at the Center for Healthcare Building Research at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden
(Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren Laura DePrado)**

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) conducted its 43rd annual conference last month in Portland, Oregon, with the theme, "Research: Shaping the Horticultural Therapy Landscape." Nearly 200 attendees from around the world attended more than 25 sessions that showcased the research, and New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania were well represented.

The range of professionals who presented included medical doctors, Ph.D.s, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed landscape architects, and registered horticultural therapists.

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting and developing the practice of horticultural therapy. The designation horticultural therapist-registered (HTR) ensures that professional competencies have been achieved based on standardized academic requirements and professional training.

Rogers S. Ulrich, Ph.D., delivered the keynote address, "Measuring the Benefits of Garden for Hospital Populations," which detailed Ulrich's research at Legacy Hospital in Portland.

Ulrich is professor of architecture at the Center for Healthcare Building Research at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden and is an adjunct professor of architecture at Aalborg University in Denmark. He is the most frequently cited researcher internationally in evidence-based healthcare design. Ulrich's work has directly impacted the design of billions of dollars of hospital construction and improved the health outcomes and safety of patients around the world.

The studies conducted by Ulrich focuses on one garden and the effects of this garden on different populations that are new mothers, families of patients in intensive or critical care and nurses in high stress. Data collection from the study is still underway.

Kenshi Nishino, M.D., Ph.D., president and CEO of Medical Corporation and Welfare Corporation of Japan, presented research on patients with dementia.

Nishino's studies reveal that horticultural therapy can evaluate cognitive function of clients and can stimulate and improve cognitive function. His research shows that a person is able to have fun at every age and feels delight, despite dementia since we can approach nature anytime and nature accepts us as we are.

"I think family medicine and primary care has a great positioning to educate about horticultural therapy," said Dr. Ann Thomas of Summit Medical Group in Bridgewater. "Medical professionals are always looking for how we can help patients in a non-pharmacological way. Medication alone is not always the answer. The season for horticultural therapy has arrived, and to have horticultural therapy in our arsenal of options would greatly benefit our patients."

Thomas said that horticultural therapy can provide meaningful activity and distraction for families in hospital waiting rooms. Her son, Joshua, 2, was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, which means that he essentially has half of a heart.

"My husband and I have spent countless hours at the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania, during Joshua's first open heart surgery when he was four days old and his second operation at 3 months old. It is an indescribable eternity to wait in a family waiting room with nothing to do that is

positive. Horticultural therapy would be an amazing modality of therapy to offer our patients,” she said.

In May, Gov. Chris Christie signed into law companion bills that designate the third week in March as Horticultural Therapy Week in New Jersey beginning in 2016. The bill, SJR12, was sponsored by state Sen. Christopher "Kip" Bateman and state Sen. Joseph Vitale.

AJR13, designed to raise awareness of horticultural therapy and expand opportunities for people to take advantage of the benefits it offers, was sponsored by Assemblywoman Donna Simon and Assemblywoman Valerie Vanieri-Huttle.

Laura DePrado is a horticultural therapy practitioner. Email laura@finaltouchplantscaping.com.

Who can benefit from horticultural therapy

People of all ages can benefit from involvement in horticultural therapy. Programs operate throughout the United States as well as in other countries and can be found in types of programs that are vocational, pre-vocational, occupational, rehabilitation, psychiatric, substance abuse, hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, hospice, palliative care, cancer centers, correctional facilities, shelters for the homeless, public and private schools, assisted living and senior centers, adult day-care and botanic gardens.

According to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, the benefits of involvement in horticultural activities and exposure to nature can be seen in cognitive, psychological, social and physical realms. Research continues to reveal these connections across many groups of people. The following list includes some of the benefits that have been cited.

Cognitive Benefits

- Enhance cognitive functioning
- Improve concentration
- Stimulate memory
- Improve goal achievement
- Improve attentional capacity.

Psychological Benefits:

- Improve quality of life
- Increase self-esteem
- Improve sense of well-being
- Reduce stress

- **Improve mood**
- **Decrease anxiety**
- **Alleviate depression**
- **Increase sense of control**
- **Improve sense of personal worth**
- **Increase feelings of calm and relaxation**
- **Increase sense of stability**
- **Improve personal satisfaction**
- **Increase sense of pride and accomplishment.**

Social Benefits:

- **Improve social integration**
- **Increase social interaction**
- **Provide for healthier patterns of social functioning**
- **Improved group cohesiveness.**

Physical Benefits:

- **Improve immune response**
- **Decrease stress**
- **Decrease heartrate**
- **Promote physical health**
- **Improve fine and gross motor skills and eye-hand coordination.**