



The New Leaf Gardeners: Horticulture supporting mental illness

The New Leaf Gardener Program is one of several therapeutic and vocational training opportunities available to clients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.



Photo: ~ Courtesy of Lauren DePrado

The New Leaf Gardeners Horticultural Vocational program at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital in Ewing Township supports recovery from mental illness, improves outlook and life satisfaction, helps clients to cope with and recover from stress, improves concentration and sense of accomplishment. Evidenced-based research demonstrates that simply viewing plants has been shown to reduce fear, anger, blood pressure and muscle tension.

The New Leaf Gardener Program (NLG) is one of several therapeutic and vocational training opportunities available to clients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital. This specific program began in 2011, but the tradition of gardening at the hospital goes back before World War I and even the Civil War.

The 400-bed Trenton Psychiatric Hospital is a Joint Commission accredited health care facility, one of four psychiatric hospitals governed by the State of New Jersey, Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

There is a tree on the campus that was planted by Dorothea Dix in 1848 when she founded the institution, and Frederick Law Olmsted is said to have later redesigned the grounds to create a placid, pastoral atmosphere. The existing greenhouse program was reinstated in the late 1970s as part of the Rehabilitation services department and provided occupational therapy, horticultural therapy and vocational rehabilitation services.



The New Leaf Gardeners Horticultural Vocational program at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital in Ewing Township supports recovery from mental illness. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren DePrado)

Today, patients and staff working with the horticultural vocational program can benefit from the Serenity Garden, where they can relax, reflect and enjoy the beauty of nature. In 2011, the Serenity Garden received the Community Greening Award from the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society. The Community Greening Award recognizes the horticulture efforts of individuals, groups, garden clubs and businesses that are dedicated to improving the quality of life through the beautification of public green spaces.

New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher joined Department of Human Services, Acting Commissioner Elizabeth Connolly on Nov. 6 to tour the NLG program where they visited a plant design class, toured the greenhouses and potting shed and viewed retail items available for purchase including houseplants, seasonal floral arrangements and birdhouses.

- [Horticultural therapist earns professional registration credential](#)

In addition, they toured the hospital grounds to view areas that have benefited from landscape design, installation and hardscaping projects.

“Growing and working in a garden provides many benefits to people, such as physical activity, concentration and a sense of accomplishment,” Fisher said. “As a result of this program there could be employment options for the participants in the nursery and greenhouse field.”

The NLG Program treats clients with various mental illness diagnoses (most common diagnoses: Psychotic Disorder NOS, Schizoaffective Disorder). The hospital admits patients between the ages of 18 and 65. The average age of patients in NLG program is 32-years-old. New Leaf Gardener workers receive three hours of education classes and three hours of paid work each week. Patients learn skills like nursery production, interior plantscaping, greenhouse management and landscaping and job skills in the greenhouse industry. The New Leaf Gardeners program also provides opportunity to learn valuable skills like communication, responsibility and cooperation. NLG workers gain knowledge and experience in the field of horticulture while also earning a wage for discharge related expenses.



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“The TPH horticulture program educates students and teaches practical skills used in the landscape and horticulture industry,” Connolly said. “The main goal is to prepare students with job readiness skills and competencies to obtain entry level employment in the green industry. The program encourages students to develop teamwork and critical thinking skills that are applicable to the horticulture industry and life.”

John Hoagland, Institutional Trade Instructor, said, "The Horticulture program gives clients the opportunity to learn how to care for plants and understand the science behind the growing of plants, giving them the job skills that they can use upon discharge. The other benefits are the life skills and critical thinking that go along with growing and caring for plants and their selves. We are working on all aspects of care for plants from germination of seeds and propagation, to design, care pruning and installation of a landscape."

- [Tis the season for horticultural therapy](#)

Craig Dupee, also an Institutional Trade Instructor added, "It is a rewarding experience working at TPH in teaching marketable job skills to the patients, which in turn provides hope and helps in building self-esteem for their reentry into the community."

Derrick, a New Leaf Gardeners participant, said, "The horticulture program provides opportunities that will prepare me for reentry to my community by increasing job skills that will take me to financial freedom."

The Green House is open to the public Monday through Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 1 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. It is at 100 Sullivan Way in West Trenton and can be reached at 609-633-1898. The Greenhouse and store can be seen from the roadway. Patrons should park in the lot and walk up the gravel path.



The NLG Program treats clients with various mental illness diagnoses. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren DePrado)

Benefits of the NLG Program to the community

According to Trenton Psychiatric Hospital Deputy CEO Robyn Caporoso, the benefits of the NLG program are widespread. "Patients gainfully and realistically contribute to society. Having a mental illness does not diminish that," she said.

Items produced in the New Leaf Gardeners program at TPH benefit the patients, hospital community and the community at large. Wanda Skarzynska , TPH Acting Supervising Rehabilitation Counselor, said, "The Greenhouse is a great place to host social and cultural events, helping to strengthen local communities. Over the last year, our clients had a chance to host several events: Arbor Day, Open House, Farm to Table, Anti-Stigma and Holiday Bazaar."

In 2014, New Leaf Gardeners joined forces with staff from Howell Living Historical Farm to plant a special crop of potatoes to be donated to the Greater Mercer Food Cooperative and other local hunger projects. New Leaf Gardeners provided donations of fresh vegetables to the Trenton Soup Kitchen. New Leaf Gardeners workers also have a chance to practice gained knowledge by making seasonal flower arrangements and retail projects which can be purchased during the holidays.

- [Flowers have a positive impact on our lives](#)

Some local businesses have helped the program. A funeral home drops off flower bouquets that clients learn how to take apart and re-assemble.

New Leaf Gardeners also grow vegetables. Travers' (a treatment building on the TPH grounds) clients bring the vegetables to cottages, and with staff support, can prepare a meal. Some of the vegetables and herbs go to campus cafeteria. The rest is sold to local residents. The sales give clients an opportunity to practice customer service.

Job Readiness Training is offered in community outings to the following local employers: Kube-Pak Greenhouse Growers, Allentown; Sieck-Wright Floral Products; Hightstown; Cherry Grove Organic Farm, Princeton; Mountain View Golf Course, Ewing; Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton; Howell Living Historic Farm, Hopewell; NJ Plants, NJNLA Trade Show, Edison; Pleasant Run Nursery, Rutgers Display Gardens, New Brunswick.

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Eight Dimensions of Wellness

The New Leaf Gardener Program at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital supports all eight dimensions of wellness. Gardening is considered a moderate- to heavy-intensity physical activity and has been linked to significant beneficial changes in total cholesterol, HDL cholesterol and systolic blood pressure. The Program educates students and teaches practical skills used in the landscape and horticulture industry. The main goal is to prepare students with job readiness skills and competencies to obtain entry level employment in the green industry. This program encourages students to develop teamwork and critical thinking skills that are applicable to the horticulture industry and life.

The dimensions of wellness:

1. Financial: Gardening is a financial resource. You will learn balancing needs, savings and wants. You control what is yours.
2. Social: Gardening involves social and community projects, building relationships and social wellness in the community.
3. Spiritual: Gardening is a great area for prayer, meditation, or a quiet place in general. A garden can be a “sacred space”.
4. Emotional: Gardening involves expressing yourself through artistic design, (for example, a topiary), and it can be relaxing and stress relieving.
5. Occupational: Gardening can provide employment and has a variety of choices available.
6. Physical: Gardening provides physical wellness through mowing lawns and weedwacking, which is a continuous exercise.
7. Intellectual: Gardening involves lifelong learning experiences. There is always new knowledge to learn.
8. Environment: Gardening allows you to create a cleaner, safer environment and gives you control over your space.