



Gardening as therapy: N.J. recognizes growing trend

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Hunterdon Freeholder Director Suzanne Lagay (right) presents to Laura DePrado a proclamation on Feb. 16 recognizing the third full week of March as Horticultural Therapy Week in Hunterdon (Sallie Graziano | For NJ.com)

New Jersey is the first state in the nation to name March 20-26 Horticultural Therapy Week, coinciding with the start of spring.

The designation is meant to showcase the benefits of connecting people and plants in vocational, social and therapeutic programs to improve the quality of life. Gov. Christie signed the legislation on May 11, 2015.

[Laura DePrado](#), a registered horticultural therapist who owns Final Touch Plantscaping in Somerset County, spearheaded the New Jersey legislation. She shared some facts about horticultural therapy.

- **Horticultural therapy is the process and practice of using plants and gardens in human healing, rehabilitation and training.**

- **It helps improve memory, cognitive abilities, task initiation, language skills, and socialization.**
- **In physical rehabilitation, it can help strengthen muscles and improve coordination, balance, and endurance.**
- **In vocational horticultural therapy settings, people learn to work independently, problem solve, and follow directions.**
- **Horticultural therapy was practiced by Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.**

Seven features of a therapeutic garden:

- **Scheduled and programmed activities.**
- **Features modified to improve accessibility.**
- **Well-defined perimeters.**
- **A profusion of plants and people/plant interactions, promoting four seasons of sensory stimulation.**
- **Benign and supportive conditions, including shade and other protective structures.**
- **Universal design, while stimulating memory, hearing, touch, smell and sometimes taste.**
- **Therapeutic gardens are simple, unified and easily comprehended places.**

A ceremonial inauguration of Horticultural Therapy Week is set for Monday in the Senate voting session. DePrado was invited as a member of the American Horticultural Therapy Association, along with immediate Past President MaryAnne McMillan.

U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance will also be issuing a federal proclamation at a separate time. Both Hunterdon and Somerset County Freeholder board have also issued proclamations.

Events and activities will take place throughout the state this month. DePrado's horticultural therapy efforts continue as well. She's [worked with a senior in Hunterdon](#), and Dr. Therese Sacchieri of Annandale Family Practice praised the results, saying the cognitive and emotional effects on one of her senior patients have convinced her to pursue horticultural therapy with four more patients.

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