

## The power of flowers and plants in our lives

BY LAURA DEPRADO

Flowers have a positive impact on our lives. Three behavioral studies conducted at Rutgers University's Department of Psychology in New Brunswick, NJ, show that flowers are a powerful, positive emotion inducer.

In study one, flowers, upon presentation to women, always elicited the Duchenne, or true, smile. Women who received flowers reported more positive moods three days later. In study two, a flower given to men or women in an elevator elicited more positive social behavior than other stimuli. And in study three, flowers presented to older participants (55 or older) elicited positive mood and improved episodic memory.

Flowers have immediate and long-term effects on emotional reactions, mood, social behaviors and even memory for both men and women.

The history, and evidence-based studies on the benefits of flowers and plants, continues to gain notoriety. It makes sense, as we would not survive without plants. We wear and grow plants. We use plants to make medicine and many other health supplements. We use plants in sickness, sorrow and celebration. The therapeutic practice of gardening has proven to have significant physical, social



Al Murray, New Jersey's assistant secretary of agriculture and a volunteer firefighter in Audubon, NJ; Anthony Bucco, senator from New Jersey's District 25; Hugh Flood, superintendent of the New Jersey Firemen's Home in Boonton, NJ; Matthew Di Lauri, mayor of Boonton, NJ; and Anthony Bucco, assemblyman from New Jersey's District 25. The men helped residents of the firemen's home create spring flower arrangements on March 22. 'Horticultural therapy has provided the men a satisfaction and memories of when they had worked in their own garden,' said Flood. 'Horticultural therapy has proven to offer great activities, and the home thanks all who have contributed to the program.' Photo courtesy of the New Jersey Firemen's Home

and cognitive benefits, and has been specialized in the field of horticultural therapy.

The percentage of U.S. households participating in consumer horticulture will increase from 70 percent in 2014 to 90 percent by 2025, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture. Consumer horticulture is the cultivation, use and enjoyment of plants, gardens,

landscapes and related horticultural items to the benefit of individuals, communities and the environment. These activities rely on the understanding and application of the art and science of horticulture.

"Horticultural therapy is the new consumer horticulture," Tom Bewick, national program leader for horticulture at the USDA's National Institute for Food & Agriculture, said in a late November 2015 phone

interview. "If you are involved with plants, you are involved with consumer horticulture." USDA NIFA, through federal funding and program leadership, sustains cutting-edge horticultural research, education and extension at its partner colleges and universities, and more.

"Abraham Lincoln had the foresight" to create the USDA, which the 16th president liked to call the People's Department. Bewick went on to say, "USDA affects peoples' lives every day, and we make their lives better every day. Horticultural therapy benefits peoples' lives every day, too. One of our goals is to engage the horticultural therapy community in our effort to benefit human health and well-being, and it is something we want to highlight. The National Institute of Health spent \$30 billion over the years on the curative aspects of health. HT can help people stay well. Consumer horticulture is a legal mandate by Congress. A strategic plan is in forward motion by USDA NIFA to address this in the form of the National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture."

Horticultural therapy techniques are employed to help participants learn new skills or regain those that are lost. HT helps improve memory, cognitive abilities, task initiation, language skills and socialization. In physical rehabilitation, HT can help strengthen muscles as well as improve coordination, balance and endurance. In vocational HT settings, people learn to work independently, solve problems and follow directions. Horticultural therapists are professionals with specific education, training and credentials in the use of horticulture for therapy and rehabilitation.

NIFA horticultural program areas are comprised of sustainable production and post-production handling (post-harvest physiology) of fruits, nuts, vegetables, flowers and landscape crops; environmentally sensitive management of landscape plantings and gardens, including sports areas and parks; and horticultural impact on human health and well-being such as social, mental and physical horticulture therapy.

Horticultural therapy uses gardening in hospitals, recovery and rehabilitation centers, senior centers, public and private schools, adult day centers, rehabilitative programs, mental health and correctional facilities. It helps veterans, at-risk youths and individuals with dementia, all with the



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goal of providing people living with physical, mental or social limitations full and unobstructed access to therapeutic gardening activities.

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (ahta.org) is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting and developing the practice of horticultural therapy as a unique and dynamic human service modality.

Horticultural therapy is rich in history. In the United States, Benjamin Rush, a University of Pennsylvania professor and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, published findings in 1812 that patients who worked in gardens had better recovery rates from mania than those who had not had the same gardening experience.

According to Rutgers Fact Sheet "Enabling Gardens: The Practical Side of Horticultural Therapy," which I co-wrote, the Friends Hospital in Philadelphia was the first American hospital (in 1879) to build a greenhouse used for patient rehabilitation. When injured World War II veterans were admitted to hospitals, physicians used on-site gardens donated by garden clubs and horticultural businesses for rehabilitational therapies.

"The horticulture industry in New Jersey is the state's largest agriculture sector with 42 percent gross sales," said Al Murray, New Jersey's assistant secretary of agriculture. "This includes nursery, sod, horticulture and floriculture." New Jersey is ranked in the top 10 in the United States in total horticulture sales, according to USDA's Northeastern Horticultural Crops Report.

Laura DePrado is president of Final Touch Landscaping LLC in Somerville, NJ, a registered horticultural therapist and a columnist, specializing in connecting people and plants. She helped write legislation designating the third week in March as Horticultural Therapy Week in New Jersey. She received the New Jersey Nursery & Landscape Association's Distinguished Service Award in 2015 and the American Horticultural Therapy Association's Alice Burlingame Humanitarian Award for New Jersey efforts in 2013. She can be reached at [laura@finaltouchlandscaping.com](mailto:laura@finaltouchlandscaping.com).



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