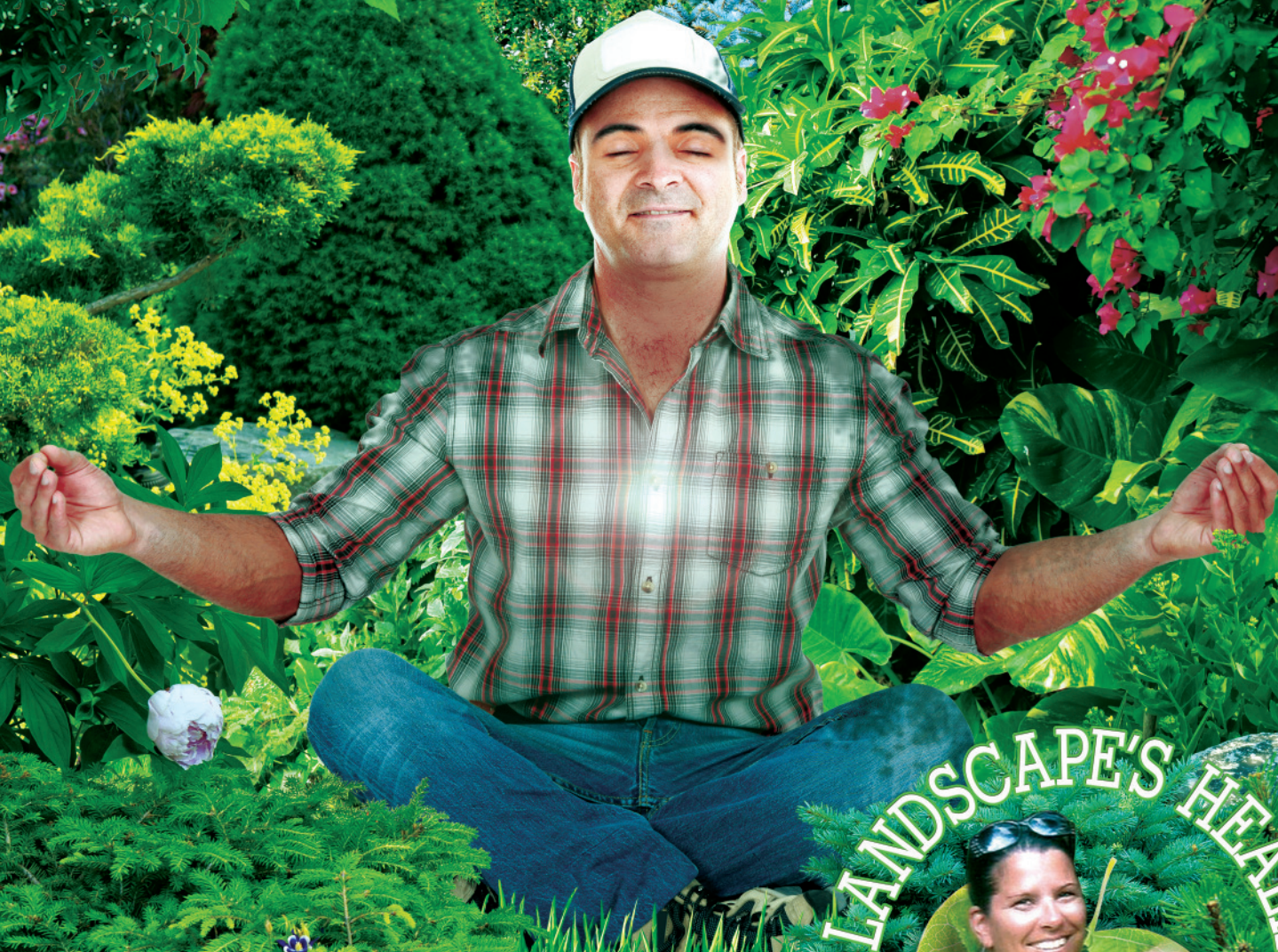
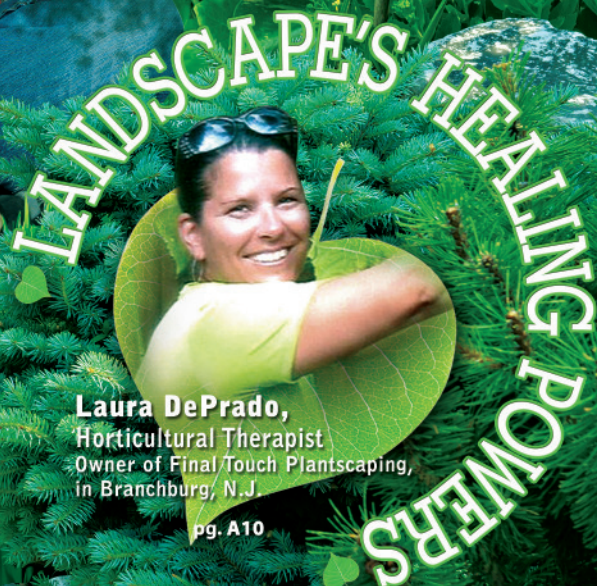


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**Laura DePrado,**  
Horticultural Therapist  
Owner of Final Touch Landscaping,  
in Branchburg, N.J.

pg. A10




A man with a white baseball cap and a plaid shirt is sitting in a meditative lotus position in a lush garden. He has his eyes closed and a peaceful expression. His hands are resting on his knees in a mudra. The garden is filled with various plants, including a large green bush to the left, a flowering plant with pink blossoms to the right, and a small white peony in the foreground. In the background, a house with green shutters is partially visible. The title 'LANDSCAPE'S HEALING POWERS' is written in a large, white, arched font across the top of the image.

# LANDSCAPE'S HEALING POWERS

Laura DePrado's quest reaffirms industry's life-affirming value

by Carol Brzozowski





**W**hen Laura DePrado planted a climbing yellow rose bush for a wrought iron arbor marking the entrance to a client's property, little did she know she had planted the seed for what would become her passion: horticultural therapy (HT). Her client's father, recently deceased, loved yellow roses. DePrado had no idea; she just had a feeling they would be of benefit there. Upon seeing them, the client was overjoyed.

DePrado, owner of Final Touch Landscaping, in Branchburg, N.J., immersed herself into learning all she could about the relationship between plants and people. When the N.J. Department of Agriculture passed the "2013 Horticultural Therapy Resolution," that marked the culmination of her efforts. County agriculture boards, educators, the Farm Bureau, vegetable growers and the owners of greenhouses and landscape companies supported the its passage. It's the first endorsement of HT of its kind in the United States.

"Horticultural therapy provides growth opportunities and community connections for New Jersey's horticultural producers," says Douglas H. Fisher, New Jersey's agricultural secretary. "Growing and working in a garden provides many positives for individuals, from increasing physical activity to learning where our food comes from."

### Plants promote healing

Essentially, HT is the process of using plants, directed by a horticultural therapist, for therapeutic cognitive, psychological, social and physical benefits. HT defines specific goals and objectives for an individual or group. What separates it from other types of garden interactions is the presence of clients, goals and treatment activities, according to Dr. Paula Diane Relf, professor emeritus at Virginia Tech.

"Our minds are made up about what we know about gardening and landscaping and making things beautiful and throwing down mulch," DePrado says. "Most folks don't think about real-life situations that they or their loved ones may be in where they love to garden and love plants and then they get cut off from being able to be connected because nobody has shown them they can do it with some modifications."

HT offers creative activities and projects that provide sensory stimulation, environmental enhancement and unique activities involving the mind and body for a client or a group of clients. A trained horticultural therapist is responsible for planning treatment, developing sessions, interacting with clients and recording outcomes as part of a treatment plan for a client's benefit. HT work may be done alone or as part of a full treatment team that could include a doctor, social worker, counselor or an occupational, physical, speech or recreational therapist.

HT can be used in a variety of settings, including: hospitals, senior centers, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, adult day care, rehabilitation programs, substance abuse rehabilitation, public and private schools, rehabilitation programs, vocational schools, correctional facilities, family shelters and resource centers, developmentally disabled day programs and group homes, day and residential housing for autistic adults, community and county gardens and arboreta.

### Final Touch Landscaping

**Owner:** Laura DePrado

**Founded:** 2008

**Headquarters:** Branchburg, N.J.

**Markets:** All of New Jersey with a focus on Somerset and Hunterdon

**Services:** Landscaping, plant care and education, horticultural therapy, remediation

**Website:** [www.finaltouchlandscaping.com](http://www.finaltouchlandscaping.com)



While learning all she could about horticultural therapy, Laura DePrado counted on it to help her overcome a brain tumor.

### So many great choices

HT practitioners use a variety of methods to achieve results: sensory-stimulating environments with plants selected for fragrance, texture and color; greenhouses for year-round enjoyment; constructing accessible entrances and paths in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act regulations; table trays; adaptable work spaces and adapting tools that are lightweight, brightly colored and interchangeable. Other methods include adaptive gardens, healing gardens, accessible raised beds, closed courtyards, adaptable benches, propagation, seedlings and dish gardens.

DePrado tells of one client, a woman in her late 40s who underwent a double knee replacement. An avid gardener, she no longer has the physical stamina to pursue her passion. She's been on physical therapy for two years and is on medications.

Continued on page A12



## Landscape's Continued from page A11

"Nothing around her home sets her up for success to get out there to participate safely and feel successful and productive," says DePrado. To address that, DePrado creates goals for the woman based on her physical ability and interests. "We set up an area where she can come outside safely on her deck where there are planters available for her so she doesn't have to step off of her deck," DePrado says. "We created a shaded area with umbrellas around the deck so the sun doesn't beat down on her and activate side effects from her medications."

DePrado brings seeds, plants and soil, which is in lightweight modular containers on wheels. Others containers are raised and installed on railings.

"We do an activity together. She doesn't have to worry about going down off the deck or getting down on her hands and knees to dig in the soil. I go every week and she gets to participate safely and fully," DePrado says.

Raised lawns are part of the design in many horticultural therapy serviced gardens.

"Folks in wheelchairs who have never sat on grass in their entire life have access to a piece of a lawn that is raised and they can fly out of their wheelchair with assistance and sit on a lawn. It's staggering what can be done," DePrado says.

HT also works with people with behavioral issues such as anger control, DePrado point out, adding, "repetition with planting seeds, potting up and re-potting things like geraniums calms. The calming effect of a repetitive activity being monitored by an HT is extremely valuable."

### Multiple benefits

Dr. Benjamin Rush, recognized as the father of modern psychiatry, was first to document the positive effect working in the garden had on individuals with mental illness. Subsequent research on HT's benefits abound. They uncategorically support the cognitive, psychological, social and physical benefits of gardens.



Landscapes and gardens have a powerful soothing and healing power unlike any other, says Laura DePrado.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FINAL TOUCH PLANTSCAPING

"Plants respond to any caregiver; plants do not judge," says DePrado. "Plants grow and change as well as help stimulate the senses, encourage participation and offer opportunity to rediscover hope."

DePrado established Final Touch Plantscaping in May 2008. As a home care professional doing light errands for clients, DePrado had been working on a 4-acre estate when the owner asked her to beautify the outdoor space. With self-taught landscaping skills and a \$100,000 budget, DePrado developed a plan for the space.

That client referred her to several neighbors.

DePrado graduated from the Master Gardener Course with Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station Cooperative Extension. She then completed a 125-hour internship for certification. She offered guidance on garden-related issues as a Somerset County Help Line volunteer and worked at Rutgers Snyder Research Farm in Pittstown, N.J., before starting her company.

### Heal thyself first

When she started Final Touch, she wanted it to have a horticultural therapy component, but needed training and credentials. As she pursued that path, HT became a personal matter for her. She had a meningioma brain tumor that started growing after being stable for five years. At that time, she was enrolled at Rutgers University in the horticultural therapy certificate program, which she completed.

"I had to become more aggressive with my schooling, the launch of the company and advocating the course for the brain tumor, which continued to grow with each MRI that I was having," she says. "I was an HT student in need of HT and embracing it in a real-life way."

Even as she faced her own challenges, she helped others. In 2009, DePrado started a garden therapy program for women in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. A 2011 brain operation proved successful.

Continued on page A16



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"All of these things kept me going, fueling the inspiration and the insight, connecting the dots and my ability to embrace how valuable horticultural therapy actually is," DePrado says. "The whole prospect and possibilities of our five senses and the people-plant connection is endless at any stage and phase of life, temporarily or permanently."

"People who were born with and go through life with disabilities can benefit from horticultural therapy. So can someone who is a temporary situation, such as a hip or knee replacement," she adds. "Horticultural therapy makes gardening accessible, safe and beneficial for the person."

### Spreading the message

DePrado does HT work throughout New Jersey, and she's won awards and scholarships for her work. She's a member of the Mid-Atlantic Horticultural Therapy Network. She serves on the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) National Conference Committee and was a presenter at its 2011 conference. She also writes about HT for local and national publications.

DePrado is the chairperson of "Growing Lives One Seed at a Time," a partnership between Rutgers and Rotary International District 7510, of which she is a member. The hands-on pilot Rotary and Rutgers Enabling Garden Initiative promotes the creation of barrier-free, accessible garden spaces for those with physical or other limitations. The pilot program has enlisted partners such as AristaCare at Cedar Oaks, a long-term care facility in South Plainfield. Rutgers provides consumer horticulture, agriculture and plant science, soil sciences and landscape design expertise.

DePrado frequently attends AHTA conferences to learn more and meet professionally registered horticultural therapists and allied professionals such as doctors and nurses from around the country. "What I learned was not only the viability of horticultural therapy around the country and that there is research and credentialed people doing this, but I found it to be my calling to bring it to New Jersey," says DePrado.

"I took my circumstances of the brain operation in 2011, my last semester going through the horticultural therapy certificate program at Rutgers University, the continued growth of the company and my skill sets as an opportunity to write, go around the country to see these horticultural therapy programs." Closer to home, DePrado also is introducing HT at a May meeting of SOHO—Small Office, Home Office, a small business professional group in Somerset County, N.J.

### Officially recognized

For DePrado, writing the resolution and seeing it pass has been her crowning achievement to date.

The New Jersey resolution recognizes the value of HT throughout the Garden State as a "practical and viable treatment" using plants and customized gardening activities to provide wide-ranging benefits for people in therapeutic, vocational and wellness programs.

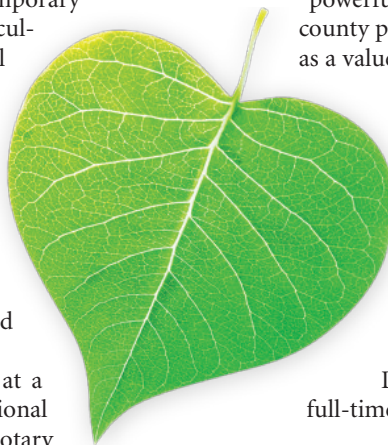
The resolution acknowledges various HT techniques and its benefits. It also recognizes registered horticultural therapists professionals (HTR) or interns as those who can deliver effective HT programs and training and internships linked with Rutgers and local community colleges, leading to job opportunities.

It directs the New Jersey Department of Agriculture to be responsive to the state's "growing and changing needs and promote HT to connect individuals with disabilities to plants."

DePrado says the resolution was four years in the making, as she "pounded the pavement" to demonstrate the value of HT in various settings and garner support from people in the greenhouse and nursery industries, farmers, growers and Rutgers University's Cooperative Extension.

DePrado wrote the resolution in three weeks and was represented by the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association, which served as a delegate on her behalf.

The resolution allows for the creation of internships, expansion of curriculum at colleges and the ability to make connections in communities where HT doesn't exist, DePrado says, adding that it has also become a "powerful tool" to act through government agencies such as county parks and recreation departments for HT to be used as a value-added service in government-funded settings.



### Company provides variety of services

HT is one of four services Final Touch provides, which also does plantscaping, plant care and education, and remediation. The company services the entire state, with a focus on Somerset and Hunterdon counties.

The company also offers services in hardscaping, landscape lighting, waterscaping, container gardens, butterfly gardens and indoor terrariums. DePrado is assisted by her husband Michael, and a full-time technology employee.

### More growth anticipated

As for HT, DePrado says she sees a time when it can become part of the umbrella services so many landscaping companies have come to offer clients.

Many make a living at it around the country in such places as the Buehler Enabling Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden, a \$15 million world class model with full-time staff and volunteers who go out to the Chicago area to do HT and host groups who come to them, says DePrado.

Legacy Health Care has healing gardens at nine of its hospitals in Portland, Ore., which services the employees, patients and visitors. DePrado says there also are "phenomenal" programs in Florida and New York.

*"Most folks don't think about real-life situations that they or their loved ones may be in where they love to garden and love plants and then they get cut off from being able to be connected because nobody has shown them they can do it with some modifications." —Laura DePrado*

As for her advocacy work, DePrado is far from done. Her next goal: seeing the New Jersey State Legislature pass legislation promoting HT. She's also setting her sights on professional improvement by becoming a registered horticultural therapist, the highest rank in the discipline.

"We're at the cutting edge of some wonderful things happening as a direct result of my education, my ability to build consensus and my completion of the horticultural therapy certificate program at Rutgers University and my track record on the various therapeutic gardens and projects I have started around New Jersey that have proven a success," says DePrado.

Carol Brzozowski, Coral Springs, Fla., is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and a frequent contributor to *Turf* magazine. Contact her at [brzozowski.carol@gmail.com](mailto:brzozowski.carol@gmail.com).