



A Garden of Hope

The restorative power of plants shines in horticultural therapy programs

by HAZEL JENNINGS ~ photographs by AL PARRISH

Through horticultural therapy, people of all ages facing all kinds of physical, emotional or psychiatric challenges can improve their well-being. Children and teens at the residential psychiatric program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center have the chance to learn about gardening with horticultural therapist Mardie Hay (near left). Growing black-eyed Susans from seed (far left) teaches patience and an appreciation of natural beauty. The harvest of their own raspberries (top right) and other edibles provides a sense of accomplishment.

Horticultural therapy is a relatively new profession that embraces and promotes the time-honored practices of using nature to heal a variety of human ailments. Horticultural therapy is used in conjunction with other treatments in rehabilitation programs, occupational training, hospitals, mental health clinics, correctional facilities, nursing homes and other sites and services. An outstanding example of horticultural therapy in action can be found at the residential psychiatric program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Children and teenagers with acute or chronic psychiatric conditions participate in this program. Some of them have been dealt both a psychiatric and developmental disability. The residents have exhausted outpatient services and had multiple inpatient psychiatric stays. The length of stay at this residential facility is about three to six months, during which the multi-

disciplinary team adjusts their medications, clarify their diagnoses and help them work on life skills for their transition back into the community.

These young people often deal with anger management, anxiety or depression, and the Horticulture Therapy Garden at Cincinnati Children's provides a safe place of nurturing and self-development. The garden serves its cultivators an equal harvest of both learning and healing.

SEEDS OF HOPE

The garden and greenhouse cover about one acre of the residential campus. "I had visited horticulture programs at other residential facilities across the country and knew the program itself could enrich children's lives," says Theresa Broerman, clinical director of the Residential Psychiatry Program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and one of the first proponents of the creation of a horticultural therapy program there.

The participants, who range from 8 to 18 years old, volunteer for the horticultural program out of interest. Most of them have never come in contact with rural gardens. In fact, when horticultural therapist Mardie Hay was teaching a resident how to harvest sunflower seeds, he admitted that he had always thought sunflower seeds were made in a factory. A few of the residents, however, have a strong emotional connection to gardening—it reminds them of time spent with a grandparent or other family member. The retrieval of these warm, happy memories is of huge value to those young gardeners.

The children and teens also learn teamwork, patience, and self esteem in the garden. "The children see

that seedlings can become much bigger things," Theresa notes. Meeting with gardening success often drives their enthusiasm. The watermelons and pumpkins they grow serve as familiar foods to enjoy, while the squash, which some have not ever seen or eaten, impresses them by growing to 15-pound weights. Activities are carefully planned to benefit the participants. Therapeutic-recreation specialists Tyre Warner, Kristy Burger and Tricia Heider help plan gardening sessions and set individual goals for the clients.

"There is something magical about digging in the dirt to find a perfectly formed clove of garlic or pulling a familiar-looking carrot straight from the ground," Mardie says. She explains that the children love to grow plants with which they're most familiar. Root vegetables also provide a valuable life lesson—that something that looks a little grubby can truly be a beautiful and valuable treasure. Theresa explains, "Nothing is too rough or beyond hope."

"Another of their favorite plants are sugar snap peas. They're so sweet and wonderful," Mardie says. While most of the children had never tried the vegetable before, the residents happily pick and eat, pick and eat. At first, many children hesitate to eat the vegetables straight from the garden, but soon nearly everyone ends up snacking on raw spinach. This serves as an important exercise in bravery, to try something new or different and enjoy it.

SENSORY STIMULATION

While growing fruits and vegetables builds awareness, teamwork, patience and physicality, ornamental gar-



dening further stimulates senses.

The residents grow black-eyed Susans from seed and ficus, pothos, tropical hibiscus and geraniums from cuttings and tend them in a greenhouse. These plants allow them to appreciate and care for the natural beauty the world has to offer.

Other plants help sharpen other senses. Residents learn to identify lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*) by touch, lemon verbena and other herbs by smell. The kids connect with the earth and all it has to offer them more fully by using all of their senses.

Gardening also provides a physical benefit. One young man suffered from debilitating anger; his frustrations with his life overwhelmed him. But he found solace in weeding. Mardie explains, "He loved to weed, to get the hoe or trowel and just get after every single

little weed. It helped him deal with his anger."

Another sturdy young man, standing over six feet tall, had spent the majority of his life dealing illegal drugs on the street. But, on the way out to the garden, his legs would shake with bottled energy and excitement. "He couldn't wait to get out and work in the garden," Mardie says.

FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR

After herbs and vegetables are harvested, they are donated to the cafeteria. On-site chefs cook with the fresh ingredients and post menu notes about what came from the garden, so the gardeners can take pride in their work. Harvesting more than 800 pounds of produce last year, the residents enjoy a myriad of recipes created from their endeavors.



Hope sprouts

"One time the children, or clients, asked if we could plant some pineapple tops from the compost pile. We did, and 18 months later they started to bloom. We harvested one of the three pineapples while the photographer from *Horticulture* was here [see left]. The message for our clients is that nothing is worthless. Many of them feel discarded because of the circumstances in their lives and (participating in the gardening program) is a way for them to build self-esteem. It is an opportunity for them to suggest new ideas and see this blossom into a labor of love. These are valuable life lessons that they take into the community when they are discharged."—Mardie Hay, horticultural therapist



gardenvisit



Healing gardens

Garden environments can be powerful healing tools for a range of cognitive, emotional and physical challenges. Horticultural therapies include:


- Cultivating plants chosen for fragrance and texture
- Learning general gardening practices side-by-side with a practitioner
- Caring for plants to learn responsibility and the effects of hopeful, nurturing feelings
- Improving muscle coordination through gardening
- Refining cognitive function by following directions, solving problems and reaching goals
- Practicing social skills through teamwork
- Feeling the value of hard work—HJ

Ornamentals are sold in a spring/summer flower sale and all proceeds are put right back into the program. Because the kids are able to experience the thrill of making profits from their work, many of them talk about going into landscaping, garden design or other horticulture fields once they leave the program.

Theresa says, “The clients each get a chance to plant three plants as they participate in the program. They learn about responsibility and nurturing by taking care of them and helping the plant thrive. These plants belong to them and when they leave they can take them along as a positive reminder of the growth they have accomplished while in our program.”

There are large parts of land not yet used by the therapy garden. While Mardie and Theresa plan to expand their

garden and raised beds, they also want to further develop the programs in which children learn life skills with their harvested produce.

To garden is not just to achieve a specific goal, but to practice an ongoing process with integrity. Gardening takes patience, problem solving, teamwork and mindfulness, just as creating a meaningful life does. The Horticulture Therapy Garden at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital takes advantage of these parallels to set its young gardeners on a path to a healthy, happy life. 

HAZEL JENNINGS is a writer and online editorial strategist specializing in lifestyle and design. She believes that all good things are beautiful and useful at the same time. When she’s not writing about gardening, decorating, fashion, dining or crafting, you can find her hiking with her two terriers, Molly and Katie, and her fiancé, Ryan. To see more, check out HazelJennings.com

We all grow

The young gardeners tend both ornamental and edible plants, inside a greenhouse and out in the yard. They work on a variety of tasks that complement their overall treatment at the residential facility. Root crops, such as carrots and radishes, show that even something a bit rough around the edges has great value. Watching other crops such as tomatoes, pumpkins and squash develop and ripen teaches about growth and change. They each get to propagate plants that they can take with them upon leaving the program, as a reminder of their own growth.