

Horticulture

Solutions for **SUMMER CHALLENGES**

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Above and opposite: Owen, a four-year-old student at Denver's Anchor Center for Blind Children, harvests a carrot in the facility's garden.

Seeing the World Differently

A Denver garden introduces blind and vision-impaired kids to the wonders of plants and soil

FOUR-YEAR-OLD OWEN knelt down in the garden patch and then buried his face in a bunch of feathery carrot tops. His tiny fingers searched for a carrot that was ready to pull.

"Here it is," Owen said, and proudly held the carrot up in the air like a trophy.

Owen is one of nearly 200 infants, toddlers and preschoolers

at Denver's Anchor Center for Blind Children (<https://anchorcenter.org/>), nationally one of 62,000 children who are legally blind. He's been coming to the Center since he was nine weeks old.

This bubbly little boy with curly red hair broke my heart, and then filled it with joy. I met Owen when I visited the Center with a class of

adult students taking training with the Horticultural Therapy Institute (htinstitute.org).

For centuries, we've known about the therapeutic benefits of gardening, but today's horticultural therapists use gardening practices to heal, rehabilitate and reach treatment goals for children, adolescents and adults in a wide range of settings.

Trying to understand Owen's world, I put on a pair of goggles designed to impair my vision. We began walking through the sunflower garden and I experienced it the way the kids do.

"About 98 percent of these kids see what you see through the goggles," said Erin Lovely, the HT coordinator at the Center.

I couldn't see much but blurry shadows and dim shades of color. In fact, the sunlight was so bright it hurt my eyes. Meanwhile, Owen's excitement overwhelmed me. He was like a happy honey bee buzzing from flower to flower.

Most of the children use canes, walkers and wheelchairs. Lovely reminded us that 70 percent of what we learn is through sight, and blind children therefore employ their other senses to learn within the environment. Preschoolers work on their fine motor skills by planting seeds or bundling herbs. Others build strength and balance by carrying watering cans to the greenhouse.

Sensory-rich activities, like planting pizza gardens, make education meaningful and transferable to home life. That's why Owen wanted to grow basil in his family's garden. His mother, Lauren Gutenplan, told me he loves to share his plant knowledge. He showed her how to smell a flower by rubbing it on her fingers and then sniffing them. Being sensory aware has given him a strategy he can apply to other situations.

To quote JC Greeley, one of the teachers who helped establish the Center in 1982, "When there is a garden, a plot or a pot, life's truths are experienced through natural consequences; the good, the bad and the yucky."

The yucky—the worms, bugs and dirt—fascinates preschoolers like Owen. Low-vision devices like magnifiers and screen enlargers bring worms and soil to life! Children who use bug cages, magnifiers and binoculars grow up knowing there

are tools to help them succeed. By nurturing plants kids learn about science, compassion and teamwork.

Lovely, a young mother of two, said there's another thing she herself has learned from the children at the Center: "Patience."

I, on the other hand, learned how to see the world differently. ❧

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