What is Therapeutic Horticulture?

**Horticultural therapy** (HT) is the treatment of a patient with horticulture activities conducted by a trained horticultural therapist to help meet patient clinical goals. Gardening activities are developed to achieve rehabilitation goals based upon the needs, interests and abilities of each patient. HT usually takes place in the hospital or rehabilitation setting.

**Therapeutic horticulture** (TH) is the use of horticulture by individuals for self, by leaders of groups, or one-to-one activity for physical, emotional, cognitive and social benefits in recreation, leisure, vocational and social programs. Each of us may realize the therapeutic benefit of gardening when we putter in the garden or care for our houseplants.

Horticulture, as used in therapeutic horticulture, includes working with all kinds of plants and natural materials. Specially trained therapists (HT’s) develop horticultural programs, which include interaction of people and plants through gardening activity both indoors and outdoors. Programs are developed to meet the needs, interests and abilities of client groups. They may include plant growth (seed germination and development of seedlings), propagation (seeds and cuttings), houseplants, bulb culture, desert gardens (cacti and succulents), plant identification, nature crafts, outdoor gardening, hydroponics, hybridization, plant nutrition, wildlife habitats, landscape design, and ecology. Education and practice in adaptive strategies and techniques increase successes.

The experienced horticultural therapist may lead multi-disciplinary therapeutic garden design teams to enhance outdoor environments for client, visitor and staff members to enrich the restorative, gardening and nature experience. Wellness activity is promoted for the public, as well as for special needs groups.

Gardening Activity: How Plants Help Us

“Gardening is good therapeutic activity for young and old. The earth has great healing power. It is the plant of course which makes it all possible. Simply realizing that we could not exist on this planet without the plant is significant. Learning how and why this is true can occupy much of a lifetime and is only a beginning. Plants are miraculous creations. They hold so many secrets that they present a challenge and a hope for the many people who are disturbed, frustrated and concerned about the future. Knowing and understanding plants can give them hope and reassurance that with death there follows life and the great cycles of the seasons are part of even greater rhythms of the universe that are not dependent on mortal man’s manipulations.”

*Plants as Therapy*, Elvin McDonald

**Benefits of Therapeutic Horticulture**

Gardening provides purposeful, constructive activity valued by society and involves both mind and body. Horticultural activities are action-oriented, the things we do with, to or for plants effect their growth. Plants need people to satisfy their needs if they are to survive. Giving a client a plant to tend often enhances their ability to assume responsibility and understand the need for nurturing. When the plant thrives, the individual responsible for its survival gains a sense of accomplishment, pride and increased self-esteem. Client participation in success oriented programs helps them to learn or relearn skills they can be proud of and use daily in recreational, social and vocational activities.
Physical Benefits

- Exercise the eyes through visual scanning, seeing near and far, and improving spatial relationships.
- Exercise hands, fingers, arms and upper body.
- Motivate the client to walk, stoop, bend, reach and maintain balance.
- Gives mild to moderate exercise in coordination, strength, stamina and physical activity when frequently nothing else will.
- Gives enormous pleasure through the senses; seeing, smelling, feeling, tasting and hearing.
- Motivates clients to use adaptive equipment as needed.
- Provides pleasurable physical activity for those with physical disabilities or sensory impairments who wish to enjoy gardening in any setting.

Cognitive Benefits

- Helps to increase orientation.
- Exercises the attention span.
- Gives practice in following directions.
- Exercises the mind in terms of memory, logic and safety judgment.
- Increases interest in gardening and the natural world.
- Teaches new skills and techniques in horticulture.
- Stimulates understanding of such abstract concepts as time, growth, death and change.
- Gives greater awareness of living things around us.

Social Benefits

- Promotes interaction by providing a common interest to discuss.
- Improves social skills, self-esteem and confidence.
- Gives practice in expressing opinions, formulating descriptions, asking questions, and exploring our sense of humor.
- Helps clients learn more effective work attitudes and behaviors.
- Motivates clients to work cooperatively with other people as a team.
- Promotes healthy interdependence.
- Allows clients to practice leadership and to become comfortable teaching others.
- Lets clients explore horticulture as a hobby.
- Lends itself to many social activities; clubs, garden socials, contests, special meals, cultural celebrations and parties.
- Gives reason to go on field trips and getting to know the community better; garden-related businesses, greenhouses, nurseries, botanical gardens, parks and recreational gardens.

Psychological Benefits

- Helps rebuild self-esteem.
- Provides opportunities to relieve tension, frustration and aggression.
- Promotes interest and enthusiasm for the future.
- Provides opportunity for creativity and self-expression.
- Success-oriented activity builds a “can-do” attitude.
- Satisfies some of the client’s needs to be nurturing and caring.
- Enhanced skills for greater independence.
- Lifts the spirits of those who have little sense of purpose or hope through isolation and loss due to illness, accident, disease process, retirement or bereavement.

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