

Horticultural therapy benefits many

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About two years ago I retired as an occupational therapist from Flagstaff Medical Center. I was working on-call and found that besides the limitations of aging, my work was beginning to interfere with my real interest in life -- gardening. Although gardening in Flagstaff was (and still is) a challenge, I found that it improved my physical and mental well being tremendously. Through a friend at the Arboretum I learned about a profession called Horticultural Therapy. I was intrigued. I decided to take an introductory course through the Horticultural Therapy Institute in Denver. To my surprise it turned out to be very much like Occupational Therapy except the activities used for treatment were garden or plant-related rather than based on daily living skills.

Horticultural Therapy or HT is really a very old concept. People have found solace in nature from almost the beginning of time. Even at the time of Christ, it was understood that the peaceful, non-threatening environment of the garden had a quieting effect on people. The first recorded use of horticulture as a treatment occurred in Egypt when court physicians prescribed walks in the palace gardens for royalty who were mentally disturbed.

Using the connection between people and plants did not become an accepted treatment until the late 1700s and early 1800s. It wasn't until after World War I that HT was used for those with physical disabilities. In 1988 the organization became the American Horticultural Therapy Association which exists today for members to formally register. (You can visit the American Horticultural Therapy Association website at www.ahta.org or call 800-634-1603 for more information.)

So just what is HT? The association defines it as "a process through which plants, gardening activities, and the innate closeness we all feel toward nature are used as vehicles in professionally conducted programs of therapy and rehabilitation."

A HT program should include the populations served, setting specific goals and providing treatment activities with plants and plant related materials. The populations that are served by HT are numerous. To name a few: nursing homes, Alzheimer care facilities, senior day care centers, hospice programs, assisted living communities, cancer treatment programs, hospitals, community mental health agencies, correctional institutions, schools, park and recreation departments and programs for youth at risk.

Think about yourself. Why do you like to garden or be out in nature? Some reasons might be for exercise or stress relief, or to challenge the mind (especially in Flagstaff). Maybe you want to grow fresh, chemical-free food or to gain a sense of accomplishment or to make new friends with similar interests. Perhaps you want to stimulate the senses. This can be visual, auditory, taste, smell and last but not least tactile.

Finally, gardening and nature promote healing. There are studies from hospitals that show putting a patient's bed in front of a window with a view of nature instead of a wall, has resulted in fewer pain medication requests, lower blood pressure, and earlier discharges.

I have used the ideas and concepts gained through my HT classes to work as a volunteer at Loyaltown Assisted Living and Olivia White Hospice Home. In both places adaptations were provided to allow those with limitations to garden, and gardens were provided to allow people to be out in nature safely. Residents and family members welcomed the gardens either by enjoying the smell of flowers, being out in the fresh air, tasting just picked vegetables, or because of the physical activity of gardening and the social interaction with their fellow gardeners.

On Saturday, June 18, I will teach a class at Coconino Community College on Horticultural Therapy with a special focus on seniors. The class will run from 9 a.m. to noon. We will discuss the principles of HT and explore the tools and methods available to allow us to continue to garden as we age. We will finish with an activity out in the Community Garden. To register for this class, call Coconino Community College Registration at 526-7644. The fee is \$30.

The author has received training through the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension's Master Gardener program and is a Master Gardener volunteer for Coconino County. If you have a gardening question, call the Master Gardener Hotline at 774-1868 ext. 19.