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[Home](#) | [Directory](#)
[Featured Column](#)
[Column Archives](#)
[News](#) | [Hot Links](#) | [Calendar](#)

You are here: [Column Archives](#): Garden Therapy



Garden Therapy and Healing Gardens

by **Michael Braunstein**

"We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." - Woodstock by Joni Mitchell

It began, after all, in a garden, didn't it? A frivolous couple named Adam and Eve were the original beneficiaries of the calm, peace and well being that a garden can instill. Of course, their stewardship was limited. They didn't have to do much. Seems there wasn't much to do except reap the rewards and bounty provided by the best gardener possible, Mother Nature. Adam and Eve enjoyed the cornucopia of plenty. That is, until they started listening to talking snakes.

There is something that comes from working the land. The connection we feel when we till, turn and rake soil is primal. To focus our attention in the way that only communing with nature can induce leads to a peace of mind that is, well, natural.

Although it may seem to be one of those common sense things that every human should realize, in our modern-day technocratic society, in which we have to label everything, working in the garden has now become an official therapy.

It is intuitive to realize that spending time with nature and seeing how the cycle of life proceeds, can lead us to a better understanding of oneself. And there are some cases where working in a garden, tending to plants, having a living organism depend upon you for survival, that helps elevate self-esteem, build confidence and restore self-worth when those elements have been threatened.

Clockwork

The ancient teaching of ayurveda describes the intricate cycle of nature and notes the implicit role each human being plays in it. We cannot separate ourselves from

Home Grown in Nebraska

Girls and Boys Town, once known as Father Flanagan's Home for Boys, was always famous for its dairy farm and rural setting. Greg Ervin is Director of Agriculture and Grounds at the west Omaha campus. At any given time during the summer he might be directing the work of up to 400 residents in gardening and grounds projects.

"We don't call it horticultural therapy per se. Like everything we do here at Girls and Boys Town, we integrate and adapt programs to fit into the Girls and Boys Town model," he said. "We see it as one piece of an overall program.

"It's pretty obvious that the basic skills of gardening apply to other areas of life. Working with nature and plants, learning to work the soil, watering, harvesting and even selling the produce -- that whole cycle reinforces basic skills and that's what

nature nor can we separate what we do from affecting our environment. We work on a daily and a solar clock. Our moods and hormones shift with the angle of the light from the sun as it elevates and dips in relationship to the horizon. In the spring and summer there may be nothing more natural than the urge to get outside and work the soil.

As a formal therapy, horticultural therapy traces its beginnings to the 1880s. In 1879, doctors at the Friends Asylum for the Insane in Pennsylvania established a greenhouse where patients were allowed to work with plants on a regular basis. As a form of occupational therapy, it was superb. But the patients saw other benefits as well. Many became re-socialized or communicated more. Some emerged from withdrawal and some became well enough to be released entirely. It was the first time an asylum used the connection between plant and man therapeutically.

Another big push occurred just following World War Two. The United States government established Veterans Hospitals and provided garden areas on the grounds. Volunteer garden groups lent their skills and support in teaching traumatized World War Two veterans how to attend to plants in the garden. By 1955, the first graduate degree in horticultural/occupational therapy was conferred at Michigan State University. In 1971, Kansas State University became the first program in the United States to develop a degree curriculum specifically for horticultural therapy. KSU remains the leader in the field. Much of the early aim of formal horticultural therapy was focused on the rehabilitation of the mentally impaired or physically handicapped. Therapists also found gardening activities were beneficial to the elderly and the imprisoned. Many institutions began to implement programs that integrated the institutional population with the natural environment. Programs are now found at hospitals, halfway houses, nursing homes, botanical gardens and assisted living centers.

The secret (non-judgmental) life of plants

It may often be the case that persons in need of rehabilitation may find themselves feeling judged. But the plant world is non-judgmental. A rose garden doesn't know whether it is being watered by a person with a handicap or by one with his full faculties. A beautifully grown and well-tended flowering plant will be praised equally regardless of the mental or physical characteristics of the gardener. In the garden, nature provides a level playing field. Patients sense that and drop their shields.

Gardening therapists are taught ways to make their

we try to give to our kids to prepare them for the workplace.”

Ervin sees a direct link between the life skills the students learn and their acceptance when they leave Girls and Boys Town.

“Employers love to hire our kids. They come to them with the kind of skills necessary to succeed and what these kids learn working outdoors, along with the rest of our program, prepares them for that. When they can step back and see an accomplishment like these kids do with teamwork and growing things, it reinforces what we teach them,” Ervin continued. “It helps the kids focus outside themselves and see how social interaction can pay off.”

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gardens accessible to the wheelchair-bound. Elevated garden plots, easy-access paths and properly selected tools bring gardening within the reach of all. The sight-impaired can be guided through the garden by the sound of wind chimes or path variations. Some botanical gardens use an interactive system that allows computerized information to be relayed to the gardener. Patients learn a new sense of self-esteem. They expand emotionally to include feelings of responsibility, creativity and self-empowerment. They learn people skills that include working with others, how to work with a supervisor and how to focus and maintain concentration. For these reasons institutions have found that horticultural therapy is an effective way to reach their patients.

We are now learning, however, that horticultural therapy when moved into the mainstream and called just plain "gardening" has benefits for every one. Classes are often taught at community colleges, nature centers and nurseries, reintroducing people to nature. Reconnecting with nature is a good idea.

With just about any of us, the ability to step back and see the big picture can help distract us from what we see as our own personal problems. Working in the yard, working in the garden and simply being in nature reinforces the link with our inner self. It is that link that truly leads to our well-being. Doctors and psychologists at the famed Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kans. were some of the first to recognize the benefits of passively experiencing flowers, plants and nature. Founder C. F. Menninger, in writing of his peonies, expressed many of the things an individual gains from living in the natural environment:

"There is a gratification of the sense of sight in color and color combinations, of the sense of smell in perfumes and odors, and to that inner aesthetic sense of beauty a charm that has, I believe, made a better physician of me. My whole nature was improved, my horizons wider and my appreciation increased in a way that aided me in my vocation."

You or I need not spend five years at Walden Pond to reap the rewards of nature. Get out in the backyard or at the very least visit a rose garden and smell, feel and breathe in nature. Plant a flower in the backyard or in a pot in your kitchen. Tend to it. Watch it grow. It may have more to say to you than you realize.

Be well.

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