

Green Thumbs Up

Working with Nature Provides a Fresh Start for Homeless and Once-Homeless Families and Adults

Plants begin from seed and must often be uprooted and transplanted to grow deep roots, to become strong, to survive and thrive. The nature of gardening is transient, and these acts of transition and growth have become a metaphor for programs around the country using gardening and farming to create stability in the lives of homeless and transient families.

by Lee Erica Elder

As seen in our Spring 2012 cover story, “Grass Roots: Innovative Food Education Programs,” the green-food and nutrition-education movements are booming nationwide. In addition to using agriculture to educate communities about nutrition, organizations find that the very act of communing with nature, especially in urban spaces, improves the mental health, physical well-being, and quality of living for the homeless, residents of low-income communities, and those in supportive housing. Participants learn coping skills and survival mechanisms and witness real-life lessons in accepting change during times of transition.

In February 2012 a consortium of health and housing advocates convened at the Sixth Annual Horticultural Therapy Forum, sponsored by The Horticultural Society of New York (The Hort), to discuss the role and merits of horticultural therapy (HT) in providing viable supportive housing for families and adults. Most of the organizations represented at the forum belonged to the Supportive Housing Network of New York (The Network), which was founded in 1988 and comprises more than 200 providers of supportive housing in New York—home to more than 43,000 such units. People from The Network, The Bridge, United Way of New York City (UWNYC), Praxis Housing Initiatives, and The Hort’s own HT programs, among many others, spoke about their experiences with horticultural therapy in supportive-housing settings. As defined by The Hort’s event literature, horticultural therapy is “an effective cognitive behavioral therapy” that provides benefits including “improved indoor air quality, access to healthy food, and a stronger sense of community

connection. For a number of Network members, the benefits of providing HT to their tenants have been immediate, substantive and tangible—tenants receive great pleasure from the flowers, plants, fresh food and herbs they’ve helped nurture and grow.”

Inspired by the stories shared at the event, *UNCENSORED* wanted to explore the ways in which horticultural therapy can effect positive change in the lives of homeless and formerly homeless individuals and families and those in supportive housing and other, similar environments.

Defining the Practices

While horticultural therapy developed relatively recently as a field, it is not a new idea. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a prominent physician, noted that working in gardens greatly benefited the mentally ill. HT training was first offered to professional therapists near the end of World War I in the occupational-therapy department of Bloomingdale Hospital, in White Plains, New York, and rehabilitation of hospitalized war veterans during the 1940s and ’50s involved HT to a significant degree. The first HT text, *Therapy through Horticulture*, by Alice Burlingame and Dr. Donald Watson, appeared in 1960.

What are the differences between horticultural therapy and therapeutic horticulture, and where does vocational horticulture fit in? The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) provides a few working definitions in its 2007 Positions Paper:

Horticultural Therapy Horticultural therapy is the engagement of a client in horticultural activities facilitated by a trained therapist to achieve specific and documented treatment goals. AHTA believes that horticultural therapy is an active process which occurs in the context of an established treatment plan where the process itself is considered the therapeutic activity rather than the end product.

Therapeutic Horticulture Therapeutic horticulture is a process that uses plants and plant-related activities through which participants strive to improve their well being through active or passive involvement. In a therapeutic horticulture program, goals are not clinically defined and documented but the leader will have training in the use of horticulture as a medium for human well-being.

Vocational Horticulture A vocational horticulture program, which is often a major component of a horticultural therapy program, focuses on providing training that enables individuals to work in the horticulture industry professionally, either independently or semi-independently. These individuals may or may not have some type of disability.

Programs around the country use these methods to help residents of low-income communities as well as the homeless. “I think the value is engaging in a rewarding, nonthreatening activity with a living thing, in this case plants, that pass no judgment, and mirror the diversity, adversity, and demands of life,” says Leigh Anne Starling, a registered horticultural therapist serving on the board of directors of the AHTA.

Starling has worked with the Homeless Garden Project (HGP) in Santa Cruz, California, which provides sanctuary, job training, transitional employment, and support services to the homeless. “Our programs take place in a three-acre organic farm and related enterprises. We also have an active volunteer and education program that served nearly 1,200 diverse people in 2011,” says Darrie Ganzhorn, HGP’s executive director. “HGP’s programs exist at the intersection of urban agriculture and food-justice movements, transitional jobs and job training, homeless services and therapeutic horticulture. There is a synergy among these purposes and ideals in daily practice at the farm.” In her time at HGP, Starling found that the therapeutic environment gave participants a sense of both self and community. “Folks who participate in the HGP gain self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness, and independence through learning about plants and the cycles of the garden (cycles of life), being responsible for a living entity that provides a basic necessity of life—food, and through cooperative efforts successfully achieve common goals. Additional benefits of working with the HGP and in the garden include communication skills, problem-solving skills, work skills and behaviors.”

Gateway Greening in St. Louis, Missouri, is an organization dedicated to educating and strengthening communities through gardening and urban agriculture, supporting more than 220 community and school gardens throughout St. Louis. In addition, its City Seeds Urban Farm provides both therapeutic-horticulture and vocational-training programs. In partnership with St. Patrick

Center, a local provider of homeless services, the therapeutic program, called Shamrock, gives participants the opportunity to observe an entire growing season and, consequently, to learn the arts of patience and leadership. The programs rely heavily on volunteers, whom the therapeutic clients have the opportunity to lead. Says Annie Mayrose, the City Seeds urban-agriculture manager, “It’s a good leadership experience for them, as well as confidence building, so they can teach what they know. They get to decide what to plant and where it’s going. We have some personal beds as maintained exclusively by the therapeutic group and that food goes exclusively to those clients.”

Matthew Wichrowski, MSW and HTR (horticultural therapist registered), a



Residents of a New York City supportive-housing facility, The Bridge, work together pruning a tree as part of the horticultural-therapy program on site.

horticultural-therapy practitioner and board member of AHTA, says that horticultural therapy “has the potential to impact many areas of human function and can meet the needs of people having significant medical and psychological challenges, to those seeking wellness and improved quality of life.” He sees specific benefits for families with children. “Horticultural therapy can impact children and families facing financial and housing challenges in many ways,” Wichrowski says. “We use ‘eat and plant’ activities to explore where food comes from and fun ways to eat healthily. Children in today’s society experience a disconnect between what they eat, how it gets there, and the impact of diet on their health. Although HT techniques employ a wide array of gardening activities to achieve therapeutic results, ‘eat and plant’ activities are a unique way to explore nutrition. HT activities provide a little exercise, and can be structured to enhance and reinforce school curriculums. The garden also becomes a place of community where social activities improve. A colleague of mine used garden activities to promote literacy by reinforcing reading skills and having mothers read to their children in the garden setting.”

In New York City, The Bridge, Inc.’s horticulture program provides clients with job training and paid employment. The program began in 2005 with the creation a roof deck at the group’s headquarters on Manhattan’s Upper West Side and a grant from the Burpee Foundation to develop a horticulture-training program for clients in partnership with the Horticultural Society of New York. The Bridge has since secured (figuratively speaking) seed grants

Right: Georgia’s Place, a residence for formerly homeless individuals in Brooklyn, N.Y., has a rooftop farm where residents take ownership of the gardening process.

from UWNYP through the New York State Department of Health’s HPNAP (Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program) to start a number of urban farms in connection with its residences; it currently operates farms at three locations. “We work with people with serious mental illness, substance-abuse issues, and HIV/AIDS who are homeless, coming out of psychiatric hospitals, and jail/prison,” says Carole Gordon, director of housing development at The Bridge. “Many also have serious health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc., and do not lead healthy lifestyles.” The opportunity to eat a diet of fresh vegetables and receive nutrition and cooking education through the horticultural program has made a vast difference in client health. Gordon’s goal is to create an urban farm at every new residence that is developed; in the next three years, she hopes to build five new farms to benefit homeless adults with serious mental illness, including veterans, young adults (18–24) referred from state treatment facilities and foster care, and low-income families, among them veteran families with children. “Bridge clients learn many skills through participation in the horticulture program,” she says. “These include physical and coordination skills and exercise, working together as a team to grow produce, farming, socialization, nutrition and cooking skills, and seeing a project through from planning, planting, harvesting, and cleanup. They learn that no task is too small and each contributes to the success of the garden. One client received certification in composting at the New York Botanical Garden and has set up composting at a few of the residences.”

Several participants in the Homeless Garden Project answered our questions about horticultural therapy. Here are some of their responses:

UNCENSORED: What techniques are taught through horticultural therapy? What skills are learned? What impact does horticultural therapy have on mental and emotional health?

HGP Trainees: “Nurturing living plants helps you nurture yourself, and in turn, those around you.” ■ “I learn patience with myself and the people I work with.” ■ “I learn focus and persistence with the task; the joy of work.” ■ “I learn how to keep something alive.” ■ “Flowers and veggies = happiness.” ■ “Nothing enlightens the soul like putting one’s hands into fertile Earth; realizing that cupped in one’s hands, rolling in between one’s fingers is a tiny universe, constantly moving—before, during and after our time.” ■ “In this fast-paced, negative society we live in, HT gives time to get grounded (literally) and feel one with the earth.” ■ “HT promotes serenity and relief from everyday stress.” ■ “Planting things makes you happy.” ■ “HT promotes calm and joy.”

UNCENSORED: How does horticultural therapy impact, or have the potential to impact, the quality of living for children and families experiencing homelessness and poverty and/or living in supportive housing?

HGP: “It creates a safe, loving, joyful community feeling and belonging.” ■ “It gives a sense of the magic of good food.” ■ “Communities in need growing food for other families in need strengthen our community as a whole.” ■ “It offers a healthy escape from limitation and a chance to get outside the temporary setbacks. Opens up possibilities for the future.” ■ “It gives people something positive to do with their time and brings families together.” ■ “Harvest and farm work bonds families together.”

UNCENSORED: Are there any other memorable experiences with horticultural therapy you would like to share with our readers?

HGP: “We have special needs pals that pick edible flowers for us often.” (Laurel Street, a day program for people with developmental disabilities, brings a group out to the farm nearly every weekday. They’ve been doing this for years and there is a wonderful chemistry and friendship between HGP trainees and Laurel Street’s participants.) ■ “Observing the sense of joy with special needs visitors. The garden is often the highlight of their day. Miraculous.” ■ “Seeing the smiles of the special needs volunteers.” ■ “My first day on the farm, I was weeding and the ducks welcomed me all morning by helping me feel included.” ■ “Feeling proud to share our hard-earned produce with foster youth, hospice patients and victims of domestic violence.”



Since 1984 UWNYP has served as a local administrator for HPNAP. Through that program, UWNYP has supported 23 different urban farm projects since 2001, in all five boroughs of New York City, including eight community gardens, eight backlot/backyard urban farms, four rooftop farms, and—as proof that urban gardening truly can take place anywhere—three hydroponic farm systems, which grow plants without soil.

An HPNAP grant also funded the first year of the rooftop farm at Community Counseling and Mediation (CCM) Georgia's Place, a residence in Brooklyn, New York, for the formerly homeless. Many there have little to no experience maintaining a schedule, making it difficult to assign gardening duties, such as weeding or watering, that must be done at certain times each day. To engage participants, Assistant Program Director David Watts got creative, asking case managers and group leaders to hold counseling sessions and group wellness meetings on the roof. As clients acclimated to the garden space, they began to connect with and take interest in and ownership of the rooftop farm. "When I think of horticultural therapy, I think of Georgia's Place," says Leigh Kusovitsky, nutrition resource manager at UWNYP. "It was hard to get them involved, but ultimately they had a lot of buy-in. One resident would go up—she was asthmatic and had pretty

severe mental illness—and oversaw two different beds on the roof. It was therapeutic to take time for herself, and she thought the air was easier to breathe—I think that was kind of beautiful." Watts agrees and notes that the residents are now choosing more vegetarian meals over meat-based fare, because they know where the food comes from.

In the Bronx, Praxis Housing Initiatives—New York City's largest provider of transitional housing to homeless people with HIV/AIDS—is planning an innovative supportive residence with an urban horticulture program. Features will include a second-floor greenhouse, teaching kitchen, orchard, and handicapped-accessible raised beds as well as an on-site farmers' market. The project

"I would have to say almost every single job involved in gardening has a lesson to teach, a life lesson. From seeding and watering in the greenhouse, you learn that attention to detail is so important. Life or death for those little seeds depends on your continual watch and care. When you watch the plants grow and grow and bloom—somewhere inside you are growing and blooming too. This begins a foundation of self-worth and respect."

—Anonymous quote from a trainee
at the Homeless Garden Project, Santa Cruz, CA

is Praxis' first major urban horticulture project at a housing site. "The idea is that not only will residents be able to use the horticulture spaces but this also will help integrate residents into the community—a way to use gardening as community development," says Jolie Milstein, director of real estate. "That is a hugely important part of our mission. Where we are resident with a housing program, we want to engage the community, and we see gardening as not only therapeutic for our residents but as a way to bring people together as a communal activity."

Perhaps one of the most surprising benefits of involvement with therapeutic horticulture is its impact not just on the homeless and others experiencing poverty, but on their caregivers and advocates. The relationship between a service provider and a client improves significantly when the two work together in the garden, and this collaboration eases some of the inherent stigma facing homeless clients. Many residents of Georgia's Place grew up on farms in the Caribbean or in the American South; Watts believes that work in the garden reconnects these clients to a time in their lives before the strife and drama of their recent years. And staff at the HGP find that gardening activities provide a tangible understanding of client needs that goes deeper than what an office session could yield. Says one staff member: "I have been able to gain a new understanding of homelessness and the varied problems and experiences that go with it. I had strong pre-conceived notions about the homeless community before coming here, and it was one of my goals to disband those and get a chance to hear a bit more about some of the trainees' stories while working with them." These strengthened relationships ultimately benefit the clients, who receive specialized care as a result. One staffer admits, "I have learned to love and care for people I never would have looked at twice."

Horticultural therapy and therapeutic horticulture in supportive housing have—so to speak—room for growth, but a fair number of challenges exist. The biggest is that "it's hard to fund," says Mayrose of the therapeutic leg of her program. "The jobs-training program is easier to fund because it's pretty cut and dried—X number of people get jobs, and we can show it's working—whereas with horticultural therapy it's much more about wellness and overall impact. If we had more documented research on programs that are out there and working—we know they are working but how are they working and why are they working? If we had that type of data, that would get more attention to programs and get more funding."

Despite the challenges, Milstein and other providers are hopeful about the future of horticulture in meeting a variety of needs for impoverished Americans.



The Bridge has a horticultural program allowing residents to work in gardens, eat fresh vegetables, and receive nutrition and cooking education.

"In an environment of diminishing resources, payback for investment in urban horticulture and housing projects is big and visible, and I think we will see more health-care providers [and] insurance companies [provide] corporate support for urban agriculture because it has the same goals as the private companies," says Milstein. "There are a lot of partnerships to be made around people taking responsibility for their food needs and engaging. There are all kinds of points of entry for urban horticulture—it doesn't have to be taking over a huge roof—there are increasing numbers of teaching opportunities. Something as small as growing a tomato can lead you into something larger."

A new project in the works, involving several parent organizations, could just be the solution to the challenges regarding data and even funding. The Healthy Housing through Horticulture Program is Praxis-conceived and is endorsed by The Network as well as the Corporation for Supportive Housing, The Hort, Enterprise Green Communities, and other organizations. "We have been actively pursuing building citywide and even regional, and hopefully national infrastructure around promoting horticulture in affordable housing projects," says Milstein. "The idea is to link everybody up that is trying to or successfully using horticulture in housing projects both in NYC and beyond. When a group wants to include urban or non-urban horticulture in their housing project, there should be a database and a network of existing programs to contact and learn from," she adds. "We believe that by coming together with our collective interest in horticulture we can help each other and really increase our chances of success." ■

For a web extra, please visit
ICPHusa.org/UNCENSORED/Webextras