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# Horticultural Therapy

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## History and Practice

Horticultural therapy (HT) is a time-proven practice. The therapeutic benefits of garden environments have been documented since ancient times. In the 19th century, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and recognized as the “Father of American Psychiatry,” was first to document the positive effect working in the garden had on individuals with mental illness.

In the 1940s and 1950s, rehabilitative care of hospitalized war veterans significantly expanded acceptance of the practice. No longer limited to treating mental illness, HT practice gained in credibility and was embraced for a much wider range of diagnoses and therapeutic options. Today, HT is accepted as a beneficial and effective therapeutic modality. It is widely used within a broad range of rehabilitative, vocational, and community settings.

HT techniques are employed to assist participants to learn new skills or regain those that are lost. HT helps improve memory, cognitive abilities, task initiation, language skills, and socialization. In physical rehabilitation, HT can help strengthen muscles and improve coordination, balance, and endurance. In vocational HT settings, people learn to work independently, problem solve, and follow directions.

## Upswing in Interest—Therapeutic Gardens

In recent years we have seen a significant upswing of interest in therapeutic gardens. These gardens are specifically designed to address a variety of applications within healthcare, rehabilitative and other therapeutic settings. In fact, the American Society of Landscape Architects maintains a professional practice network of consultants who specialize in designing therapeutic gardens.

## What is a Therapeutic Garden?

A therapeutic garden is a plant-dominated environment purposefully designed to facilitate interaction with the healing elements of nature. Interactions can be passive or active depending on the garden design and users’ needs. There are many sub-types of therapeutic gardens including healing gardens, enabling gardens, rehabilitation gardens, and restorative gardens.

## What is the clinical definition of a Therapeutic Garden

What makes a garden therapeutic? The basic features of a therapeutic garden can include wide and gently graded accessible entrances and paths, raised planting beds and containers, and a sensory-oriented plant selection focused on color, texture, and fragrance.

## Characteristics

The AHTA (American Horticultural Therapy Association) describes a Therapeutic Garden as having: (Adapted from American Horticultural Therapy Association Board of Directors, April 30, 1995). Some common characteristics are:

### 1. SCHEDULED AND PROGRAMMED ACTIVITIES:

A horticultural therapy program guiding and promoting a program of activities and experiences in the garden is ideal. However, even in gardens designed for the passive/independent enjoyment by visitors, special events increasing the number of visits, classes encouraging routine garden tasks, and publicizing activities of all kinds familiarize special populations, facility staff, families of clients/patients/residents and nearby community residents with the garden.

### 2. FEATURES MODIFIED TO IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY:

Garden elements, features and equipment are all selected or modified to provide accessible places, activities and experiences to the greatest extent possible. Each modification to the therapeutic garden environment eases the task of gardening and or enhances the horticultural experience for the visitor/gardener enabling them to see and even to study plants, to touch or smell them, to encounter the luxuriant garden growth in their own way, on their own terms and at their own pace.

### 3. WELL DEFINED PERIMETERS:

Edges of garden spaces and special zones of activities within the garden are often intensified to redirect the attention and the energies of the visitor to the components and displays within the garden.

### 4. PEOPLE/PLANT INTERACTIONS:

Therapeutic gardens introduce individuals to planned, intensive outdoor environments in which the conscious provisions of spaces and places for restoration, horticulture education, therapy, and for social exchanges are organized into legible and verdant, plant-dominated open spaces with simple patterns of paths and workplaces. The garden promotes four seasons of sensory stimulation.

### 5. BENIGN AND SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS:

Therapeutic gardens provide safe, secure and comfortable settings for people. The avoidance of potentially hazardous chemicals such as herbicides, fertilizers, and insecticides, the provision of shade and other protective structures, the flourishing plants, and the protected and protective nature of the therapeutic garden offer personal comfort and refuge to the garden user.

### 6. UNIVERSAL DESIGN:

Therapeutic gardens are designed for the convenience and enjoyment for people with the widest possible range of conditions. As practical and pleasurable landscapes for people of all ages and all abilities, these gardens commonly stimulate the full range of senses including memory, hearing, touch, smell and sometimes taste as pleasurable alternatives to the visual experience of gardens. The therapeutic garden exploits the most complete range of people/plant interactions and experiences possible within its enclosures.

### 7. RECOGNIZABLE PLACEMAKING:

Therapeutic gardens are frequently simple, unified and easily comprehended places. An intensified recognition of garden patterns and garden experiences enhance the unique identity of a garden as a special place for the people it serves. Placemaking, an important strategy in all landscape design efforts, heightens the visitor’s focus on plant related sensuality, comfort, and independence experienced within a therapeutic garden.

## Books to learn from

There are many books dealing with horticulture therapy to helpful, hands-on guides for the needs of specific populations.

***Designing Outdoor Spaces for People with Dementia***, Mary Marshall, Annie Pollock, Eds. 2012, Hammond Press. Filled with case studies of real examples from all over the world. It is not an academic guide to research but a book for people in practice.

***Accessible Gardening for People with Disabilities: A Guide to Methods, Tools and Plants*** Janeen R. Adil, 1995, Woodbine House. Presents all the information and practical know-how necessary for designing, planting, and maintaining a garden that suits the special needs of young and older gardeners with physical disabilities.

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