

What is Horticultural Therapy, Anyway?

Text by Lisa Ann Douglass, Photos by Hillary Fitz

Have you ever wondered why you feel so much better after you smell a flower, toil in the soil or get a fresh breath of air? Have you ever noticed that you sleep better after gardening? Well, it is true - we really do feel better after these activities. Numerous brain studies prove it. Often people do not recognize the therapeutic benefits they receive from gardening, but often they say, “I feel so much better after spending time in the garden”.

From my personal experience, I know that gardening can relieve stress, anxiety, and clear the mind. I have been a beneficiary of the mood stabilizing effects of gardening. I have personally felt how gardening can increase my sense of tranquility, spirituality and enjoyment of engaging in nature. These are real effects that gardening has on me. The powerful healing I’ve experienced in the garden is one of the reasons why I changed my career to become a Horticultural Therapist.

Many people are familiar with professions such as Occupational Therapy and Physical Rehabilitation. Doctors write prescriptions for these services to help restore a patient’s physical wellbeing. Would you be surprised if you received a written prescription to see a Horticulture Therapist? You might say, “What is that? What is Horticultural Therapy anyway?”

WHAT IS HORTICULTURAL THERAPY?

Horticultural Therapy is not a new concept, although it is making a comeback in modern science and medicine. It has been documented since ancient times. For instance, some of the most powerful healing medicines trace back to roots in Mesopotamia around 500 BC. In Ancient Egypt and Persia, they created gardens to soothe the senses, provide beauty, and cultivate healing medicines. Many of these healing herbs are still in use today and a number of modern medicines have been derived from these powerful plant compounds.

In the 1800s, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a psychiatrist who was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was recognized as the “Father of American Psychiatry.” Dr. Rush was first to document the positive effects that working in the garden can have on individuals with mental illness. In 1879, Friends Hospital in Philadelphia built the first greenhouse in a hospital setting that was dedicated for the beneficial effects that plants had on patients. Since World War I, over 100 years ago, Horticulture Therapy has been used



Lisa Ann Douglass conducts a “Blooming Minds” class.

to help servicemen rehabilitate after traumatic stress and mental illness. During the Second World War in the 1940s, garden club members brought gardening activities directly to the servicemen.

So what exactly is a Therapeutic Horticulture garden, you ask?

According to the American Horticulture Therapy Association, “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.”

Horticultural Therapy, like Physical Rehabilitation and Occupational Therapy, all have common objectives and goals. The common objective is healing and recovery. What is unique to Horticultural Therapy is that it incorporates the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—engaging all of the senses to achieve a deep-healing effect and improve overall wellbeing. Horticultural Therapy has been shown to help regulate emotions, moods and perceptions. It can provide relief to people who experience anxiety, depression, PTSD, or those who suffer as a result of experiencing trauma.

Here are just a few examples of the many kinds of people who might benefit from Horticultural Therapy:

- * A person who has witnessed a shooting or other shocking event, and then suffers from post-traumatic stress;
- * A child who comes from a low-income home without enough to eat and experiences anxiety due to chronic food insecurity;
- * A teen who has been bullied and suffers from trauma, anxiety or depression.

Regarding social justice, studies have shown that there are serious food inequities when comparing underserved, low-income households to those with higher incomes. Underserved communities can benefit from the role of the Horticultural Therapist, which includes designing gardens and providing experiences in public spaces where people can visit the garden to enjoy growing food, learn, or simply take in the beauty of nature. The garden can provide a safe space, which is integral to a therapeutic setting. This space also offers access to nature, which are often not available to underserved communities.



In the first Blooming Minds session, children learned All About Apples.

The garden offers many benefits and opportunities for everybody, particularly those who have experienced trauma in urban environments—to feel nature’s positive influences on regulating the nervous system, calming and soothing the body and mind.

St. Louis has a large number of food deserts, or areas where there is inequity and lack of access to healthy, wholesome food. Here lies an opportunity to truly make a difference. The garden could be an amazing resource for those who are truly in need of healthy foods for their family.



My goal is to become a Horticultural Therapist, help provide these much-needed services and a place of refuge for those communities that have gone unheard for too long.

EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS

I have the pleasure and privilege of working as the Garden Education Coordinator at a prominent garden center in suburban St. Louis. For many years, it has been a community partner, teaming up with organizations such as Gateway Greening, the St. Louis Zoo, and GrowNative - helping to spread the word about the amazing benefits of gardening. As the Garden Education Coordinator, I conduct educational activities in and around the garden. Using an outdoor classroom setting is an amazing experience and I have so much fun with the kids!

The kids who attend our programming have an opportunity to get some fresh air and spend an hour of their time away from cell phones and electronic screens. Their parents benefit by having an hour of free time to browse, get some work done, or simply just sit down and relax in a nature-filled space. When the kids come to a session, they get to participate in a number of hands-on projects. Whether it be getting hands dirty with a planting project, touring

the nursery and interacting with a variety of plants, collecting little treasures in nature, or making nature related projects—there is so much to be experienced at the garden center. Now more than ever, as the stresses of the pandemic weigh heavy on families and on education, our goal is to provide an alternative to screen time and a memorable outdoor experience that is uplifting, positive, and nourishing. We have consistent, repeat families that attend our sessions and it is so rewarding to see the joy that this programming brings to the children and the parents. One parent commented, “We have enjoyed every class we have been to. The kids have learned a lot and we talk about what we learn in the lessons. We take it home and we live it”. Even though the classes are for children K-5, the parents often walk away learning something new, too! Some have walked away with recipes, fresh vegetables, and more. After our Roots and Shoots class, one parent even took a trip to the grocery store with the kids to find the vegetables we discussed in class!

Before we begin each class, I always welcome each child personally. At every session, I ask each child how they’re doing. Then I explain the rules of the class, such as raising hands to ask and answer questions, being mindful of talking over others, listening to what others have to share, and cleaning up afterwards. Hillary Fitz, our marketing manager and a certified yoga instructor, begins and sometimes also

each class with a mindfulness & yoga activity. This part of the programming is designed to help the kids to relax and focus, clearing their minds and preparing them for the next stage of the class.

“BLOOMING MINDS” – A PILOT PROGRAM FOR KIDS

In 2020, Jennifer Schamber, our general manager and the contributor who usually writes in this space, wanted to do something special for children and families in the community that were being affected by the pandemic. She asked me to put together an educational program for children. When it came time to move forward with the plan, Jennifer, Hillary and I teamed up. We put our heads together and came up with ideas for the program that we decided to call “Blooming Minds.”

“Blooming Minds” is a pilot program that draws on therapeutic horticulture techniques with an emphasis in science and mindfulness. As a community resource, Blooming Minds program is free for children who attend. It is experiential educational program for children ranging from kindergarten to 5th grade. Hosting programming during a pandemic is definitely a challenge, so we got creative while still keeping safety the top priority. We practice safety precautions and social distancing. Class size is limited to 6

children per class to keep the kids safe.

We just completed our first Fall program, which ran 8 weeks, ending in mid-October.

Here's an example from Week One:

ALL ABOUT APPLES

We started the session with fun, educational information about where apples come from. I read a book called *No Ordinary Apple: A Story About Eating Mindfully*, by Sara Marlowe. It encourages children in a humorous way and teaches them to slow down and appreciate eating in a very simple, mindful way. In class, each child tasted slices of different apples and was asked to describe the flavors of each apple, using several different mindful tasting techniques. The kids gave some very interesting responses to questions about the apple's sweetness, how the apple feels on their tongue, and how it feels different in various parts of their mouth. Next, they voted on their favorite apple and why they liked it best. At the end of each session, I closed by asking the children what was the most important thing that they learned. After listening to the responses, I found that they were able to understand the point of mindfulness. We talked about how they could apply these same techniques when tasting different foods - even foods that they do not like. We also got creative with an apple-based art project!

SO HOW DID THE PROGRAM GO?

The program showed some amazing benefits. It encouraged kids to go outdoors, breathe fresh air, and let the sunshine warm their faces. They learned a lot over the course of the programming and walked away with not only some amazing nature-inspired art projects, but with an appreciation for nature and a better understanding of what

mindfulness is. Their parents and grandparents benefit as well from the opportunity to have some personal time and foster independent learners.

I loved every second of working with the kids. Watching the kids engage with nature and reap the benefits of this programming was truly inspiring. I have a wonderful feeling and cannot wait to see where this journey takes me.



Lisa Ann Douglass is the Garden Education Coordinator at Greenscape Gardens, in Ballwin, Missouri. She is currently completing her credentials as a registered Horticulture Therapist, recognized by the American Therapeutic Horticulture Association. She earned her MBA from Kennesaw State University. She is a certified Therapeutic Horticulture Activity

Specialist in Advanced Behavior & Cognitive Development.

She is also the owner and Executive Director of Healing Seeds of Eden LLC. In 2021, her company will begin the first round of funding to support purchasing land, designing and creating the "Healing Seeds of Eden Community Gardens" which will serve as a public space dedicated to providing Horticulture Therapy, education and outreach activities to support the diverse communities of the greater St. Louis area.

TO PLANT A GARDEN IS TO BELIEVE IN TOMORROW

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