



Living Learning Landscapes: Therapeutic Gardening in Schools

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Anyone who has dug their hands into the earth, faithfully watered, and watched as new life emerged from the soil is no stranger to the way gardening lifts the spirits. But the professional therapeutic process of horticultural therapy is about more than just fresh air and new seedlings. It addresses the needs of the whole person: horticultural therapy uses plants and gardening to increase self-esteem, reduce depression and anxiety, create community and a sense of belonging, and provide sensory enjoyment and a feeling of awe and wonder. It provides gentle exercise and can be modified for many skill levels. It's a tool for education and can provide job training and practical skills that lead to greater independence. And all this to people with all kinds of needs; populations served include

individuals with mental illness, physical challenges, developmental disabilities, memory impairment, and more.

The Garden's first horticultural therapy program began in 1978, just five years after horticultural therapy was officially established as a profession. North Carolina Botanical Garden (NCBG) staff worked in hospitals, mental health centers, correctional facilities, and schools. Today, under the direction of program manager Sally Haskett, the NCBG horticultural therapy program carries on that legacy through programs for adults at the Garden, at continuing care retirement communities, and at The Farm at Penny Lane, a working farm in Chatham County serving individuals with mental illness.

Amy Brightwood was interning with Haskett as part of her training to become a registered horticultural therapist when she came up with the idea for her long-term project: a therapeutic horticulture program for exceptional children—those who are differently abled—incorporating goal-based lesson plans with hands-on time in pollinator and vegetable gardens. She brought the project to Glenwood Elementary in Chapel Hill last summer, working with teachers, counselors, and parents to develop program goals and prepare the school's gardens. Beginning in fall 2017, students at Glenwood with learning differences and behavioral challenges learned about the importance of pollinators and examined real-life chrysalises, and then planted pollinator-friendly native perennials propagated by the

Bees, Brightwood was also able to consult at each school about how a therapeutic horticulture program or garden might be implemented. Through Living Learning Landscapes, over 50 distinct species have been planted across the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School district, many from the NCBG nursery. The program's vegetable gardens, harvested in the fall, promote the development of home gardens and enrich family access to healthy organic foods.

At Scroggs Elementary in southern Chapel Hill, Brightwood worked with fourth grade teacher and school garden club coordinator Jeanette Dixon to plant a sensory garden full of plants that engage kids' senses of smell, touch, taste, and sight. Kids of different ages and with a variety of developmental and physical differences plant, weed, and water together in gardening programs at Scroggs, an integrated learning experience that builds community among students.

Beyond helping teachers with the initial development of a school therapeutic horticulture program, the Living Learning Landscapes training provided an opportunity for peer support and sharing ideas that Brightwood hopes will continue to motivate teachers going forward. Teachers in the training swapped ideas about programming and talked about how to make their programs sustainable by applying for grants and cultivating parent involvement.

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And the results are clear: the exceptional children teacher and the school counselor at Glenwood whose students went through Brightwood's program last fall agreed they saw significant, positive changes in their kids through their work in the gardens. Kids with behavioral challenges who had been having a hard time with aggression demonstrated decreased impulsivity and improved focus, cooperation, and social skills. Kids with learning differences showed improved language and social skills, a better ability to follow step-by-step instructions, and an increased sense of self-esteem and accomplishment. According to exceptional children teacher Annabelle Davenport, the students who worked on the gardens last fall "are still very proud of their achievement" and are "very keen to show their creation to visitors to the school."

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Below left: A student waters the new garden at his elementary school. Below right: Teachers learn how to use horticultural therapy in their schools. Facing page: The pollinator garden at Glenwood Elementary School.

