

Activity: Planting Goal: Cognitive/Intellectual Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Beach Sunflowers & Resiliency

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will transplant beach sunflowers.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Process horticultural information during session; apply acquired knowledge to task

Physical: Exercise muscles when transplanting sunflowers; strengthen mobility, bending, balance & stamina skills

Psychological/Emotional: Explore the theme of resiliency, adaptation in plants & people

Sensory: Engage all senses except gustatory sense during activity

Social: Participate in a group service project; work cooperatively with others

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Identify sites where beach sunflower has survived storms & where it would be appropriate to remove plants (vacant lots, roadsides). Get permission for removal & for sites where the sunflowers will be transplanted. Gather materials. Organize service project (date, location, tools).
2. Facilitator begins session by thanking people for participating in this service project. A few horticultural tips are shared, focusing on successful transplanting of beach sunflowers. Noting the resiliency of beach sunflowers after storms, facilitator leaves this idea with participants & their own resiliency to think about during the session.
3. Plants are identified as available for removal. Shovels or spades are used to dig down to reveal roots & remove plant. They are then transported to new location.
4. When transplanting beach sunflowers, the hole needs to be as deep as the roots, with watering occurring immediately after transplanting. Water regularly & often & protect from full sun during establishment period.

Materials

Identify sites where sunflowers will be removed

Shovels, spades, water cans, containers

Gloves, wipes

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Beach sunflower's ability to thrive after hurricane damage demonstrates its resiliency in the face of adversity. Using this plant for TH sessions can provide a theme of resiliency, adaptation and ability to thrive after huge challenges. *Helianthus debilis* beach sunflower blooms year-round in warm climates and can be transplanted. This provides an opportunity for transplanting after a weather disaster, moving the plants from vacant or damaged areas to more suitable locations. This might include seniors' facilities, sand dunes, parks or schoolyards. Organized as a service project, community beautification initiative or TH session with individuals or populations, the act of recognizing beach sunflower as a survivor of a hurricane or storm, then taking action to relocate plants to places where they can flourish can be impactful psychologically, physically and cognitively.

The American Psychological Association defines resiliency as the “process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (2025). How people adapt to challenges involves perceptions of the world, social resources that can be accessed, and coping strategies. Research suggests skills associated with resiliency can be cultivated and practiced.

This TH activity, structured more often as a participatory service project vs a scheduled therapeutic session, can promote wellness and gardening activities where positive health outcomes can be experienced. The facilitator can leave the idea of [coping and adapting to climate and weather natural disasters](#) with participants without necessarily going into great detail, talk therapy or formal group sharing. Discussion among participants is likely to occur, where individuals will be social, share their experiences with the storm and aftermath, and be part of a group effort to process and understand plants and humans better.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Safety on the sites, streets and space between removal and transplanting locations is essential and need to be free of car or other safety issues.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: The transplanting project works best if the removal site is close to the location where the plants will be replanted. Participants can then walk between the sites. Alternatively, the plants can be moved but the participants remain for either digging up or transplanting flowers. Schoolyards and parks may not have these issues, where both tasks would occur on the same site.

Beach sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) is a perennial plant known for its ability to reseed. It spreads, growing in clumps, and has deep taproots. It is a butterfly attractor, with yellow petals and brown centers, is a Florida native plant. It is salt tolerant and drought-resistant.

“There are actually three subspecies of *H. debilis* that can be found in Florida. *Helianthus debilis* subsp. *cucumerifolius* (cucumberleaf dune sunflower) is found on coastal dunes scattered along the northern counties of the Gulf Coast south to DeSoto county. Flower heads of this subspecies generally rise 7 to 10 inches off the ground. *Helianthus debilis* subsp. *debilis* (east coast dune sunflower) is found growing on coastal dunes along the Atlantic coast. Flower heads of this subspecies rise up about 4 to 10 inches above the ground. *Helianthus debilis* subsp. *vestitus* (west coast dune sunflower) grows on coastal dunes along the Gulf Coast, from Pinellas County south to Lee County. Flowers of this subspecies rise up between 2 to 6 inches” (University of Florida, 2024).

Multiple varieties and cultivars of beach sunflower grow along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts in the U.S.: “var. *cupreatus*, copper-red rays; var. *purpureus*, pink or violet rays; var. *roseus*, rose colored rays; 'Dazzler', chestnut and orange head; 'Excelsior', yellow, red, brown, and purple head; 'Orion', deep yellow head” (Gilman et al., 2023).

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Gilman, EF., Park-Brown, S., Klein, RW., & Hansen, G. (2023). [Helianthus debilis beach sunflower](#). EDIS.IFAS.ufl.edu.
- The American Psychological Association. (2025). [Resilience](#). APA.org.
- University of California San Francisco Human Resources. (2025). [Coping with wildfires and climate change crises](#). HR.USCF.Edu.
- UF|IFAS Center for Land Use Efficiency. (2024). [Hurricane landscaping](#). Gardening Solutions.IFAS.UFL.Edu.
- University of Florida. (2024). [Beach sunflower](#). UF|IFAS Extension Gardening Solutions.

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2025.