

Activity: Plant Care **Goal:** Psychological/Emotional **Populations:** Veterans & Active Military

TH Activity Plan – Cut Flower Production

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Photo by Veteran Farm Project



Materials

Garden tools for planting, harvesting, sorting

Bouquet wrapping materials

Bulletin board/task lists

Gloves, wipes

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will undertake tasks involved in cut flower production at a farm setting.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Make choices for own self-care related to level of participation in cut flower production in this setting; select plant tasks; take pride in accomplishing daily plant tasks

Physical: Increase physical activity in a farm setting; increase physical strength, stamina, coordination

Psychological/Emotional: Expand sense of safety being in a public setting; recognize physical tasks as a coping mechanism for trauma, injuries & psychological healing

Sensory: Expand sensory tolerance handling various plant materials

Social: Interact with other women veterans in socially appropriate manner; offer informal peer support & encouragement to other veteran volunteers at the farm

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

- 1. Pre-Session Preparation:** Facilitator determines what farm tasks need to be done each day. Prepare written list of tasks & post it for volunteers & staff. Gather tools that may be needed.
- Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants who are attending the scheduled session, with self-introductions, outlining farm safety protocols, & ensuring all participants feel comfortable with farm animals. Facilitator reviews the daily tasks, locations for the tasks, and communication methods on the farm (phones, walkie talkie).
- A brief discussion on expectations, role of farm staff, TH/physical tasks vs talk therapy focus is conducted by facilitator, in this setting that promotes peer support & not trauma talk or airing of grievances. One on one discussion or in small groups can be selected as appropriate.
- Facilitator identifies plant-based tasks to be undertaken in the 2-hour session including planting, weeding, harvesting, sorting, drying flowers, or working in the field, cold storage area, or at sorting tables.
- Facilitator works with or alongside participants, providing support as needed, guiding the horticulture tasks. As participants depart, facilitator thanks them, offering encouraging remarks.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: The therapeutic horticulture program described in this THAD is based on an actual working flower farm that was established specifically for women veterans and active military. Their experiences within the armed forces included (for some), military sexual trauma and physical injuries, and post military, navigating their transition from active military service and perhaps food insecurity. Participants are seeking mental health and peer support, in a safe space without talk of trauma. (Other health services outside of this program provide talk therapy, counselling etc.). Important elements of the TH programming include a focus

on the horticulture task, task-oriented volunteer activity, barrier-free physical farm facility, and female-led, female inclusive setting. The TH activities utilize military-trained organizational skills, in an outdoor setting with few confined spaces or chaotic atmosphere (a term used to explain a setting). Participants work as they are able to, physically and emotionally. There are no expectations for participants to take responsibility for flower production, but rather, to volunteer, assist and to build a personal sense of confidence, sense of safety, and for some, transition to non-military vocational paths on their individual journey post service.

The TH focus and its activities resonate with participants on various levels like metaphors related to plants' resiliency and ability to survive, full cycle of growth and regrowth (plants and humans), beauty that can come in many forms, physical work where gardening breeds sense of accomplishment, and learning through trial and error which can be satisfying and rewarding.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Allergies and safety concerns for each participant should be identified prior to participation in the program, along with their mental resiliency, self-harm or suicidal possibilities. (This would not be asked on any form or in a group setting, rather a facilitator (certified in Peer Support) would let the group know if anyone would like to chat personally about anything the facilitator is available. Avoiding possible triggers in a group environment is critical for each person's safety). Personal and medical contacts should be charted in case of emergencies. Access to sun protection and water (preventing dehydration) should be available.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Cut flowers grown for this purpose include perennials and annuals - cosmos, snap dragons, tulips, statice, yarrow and zinnias in Canadian zone 6a farm setting for example. The Veteran Farm Project model described here is structured in 3 ways to achieve maximum participation. *Scheduled Sessions* have designated time, activity, and outcome. *Volunteer Call Out* helps achieve a large collective goal (planting fall bulbs, harvesting, and processing summer garlic, or help packing food hampers for families with food insecurities). Thirdly - *Drop In* at the farm without any schedule or plan for the day. Participating women typically do not like to be in large groups or with strangers and are looking for a peaceful place to relax, help as they can or play with their dogs. There is always an open invitation for women veterans to drop in Tuesday-Thursday. The facilitators' 7 years of experience delivering this TH has led them to understand the needs of the women including structuring sessions with 8 or fewer participants (this promotes focus on therapeutic activity, not becoming a grievance/complaining session).

Farm staff prep the flower beds and take responsibility for overseeing the production, with participants joining in tasks like planting, deadheading, mulching, harvesting, sorting, prepping and preparing bouquets. The Veteran Farm Project uses 30 ft beds, these determined to be less intimidating and easier to work than larger beds. Other features include large pathways, tools on site, and a 20x12 hard top gazebo for shade/resting from physical work.

The TH programming incorporates the Canadian military philosophy and leadership methodology principle: teach one, show one, do one. Funding is provided by Veterans Affairs Canada, The Royal Canadian Legion Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, and Government of Nova Scotia. A close collaboration with a local garden center provides opportunity to help generate revenue for the farm, support the *We Care* food hampers, and allows the local community access to beautiful local fresh flower bouquets sold through the garden center.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Government of Canada. (2019). [Soldier On Program](#).

Soldier On. Sans Limites. (2024). [Activities and events](#).

Veteran Farm Project. (2024). Veteran Farm Project. <https://www.veteranfarmprojectsociety.com/>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2024.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.