

Activity: Plant Care Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: Mental Health

## TH Activity Plan – Daily Gardening Tasks

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**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participant/patients from a psychiatric hospital will garden in the onsite garden.

**THERAPEUTIC GOALS:**

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Recognize strategies for improving self-regulation; follow facilitator directions

**Physical:** Exercise and increase movement planting, watering, weeding & harvesting plants

**Psychological/Emotional:** Self-select garden tasks; strengthen sense of empowerment through decision-making; choose non-preferred tasks

**Sensory:** Experience the outdoors; increase tolerance to all types of weather

**Social:** Interact one on one or in small groups; strengthen communication skills & increase verbal engagement

**Materials**

Garden plants & seeds

Garden tools

Gloves, wipes

**STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:**

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:**
2. Facilitator begins session observing the unit plot with participants, determining & discussing what garden tasks need to be done on that day.
3. Participants identify tasks they are interested in doing, this providing a sense of empowerment. Some participants may choose to be more passive, watching & not gardening.
4. Facilitator supports participants with plant knowledge & horticultural techniques while guiding them in doing garden tasks.
5. One on one or small group interactions & discussions occur during the garden session.

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** Gardens at hospitals or other mental health settings can provide outdoor space where both structured and less structured TH/therapeutic recreation/recreation activities can occur. This format where garden tasks in need of being undertaken on a daily basis affords the facilitator, participants and others the chance to work on goals and personal growth without undue pressure to achieve specific outcomes. They are not required for example, to harvest 5 pounds of beans or identify 3 coping mechanisms for shy behavior. Therapeutic goals and outcomes can be measured if institution or treatment plans require this. Time in the garden can focus on specific health goals and can be measured using metrics including observational notes, pre-post evaluations and sense of wellbeing questionnaires. Or gardening programs and garden tasks structured like a garden club, can be an option more suitable for some.

This TH activity can be developed and delivered with allied health professionals like recreation therapists and occupational therapists appropriate for settings like hospital gardens, mental health facilities and outpatient clinics. If a recreational focus is implemented, therapeutic goals related to this can integrate hands-on gardening

activities and can include trying gardening as a positive leisure activity. Related goals can include increasing outdoor time with outcomes of providing increased melatonin production through sunlight exposure, this also contributing to improved sleep. Goals of improving mood, lowering anxiety and stress, opportunities for reminiscing, and increasing confidence (as evidenced by improved communication skills and exchanges) can also be incorporated.

Therapeutic goals do not have to be overt. The combined recreation/horticulture interventions can offer people with mental health challenges an opportunity to find safe sanctuary in a garden, participate in physical activity, interact with others in small groups (so as not to be overwhelming), and engage with members of the community who are volunteer garden assistants. In some cases, individuals may be ready to work towards more challenging self-regulation functioning like selecting non-preferred (garden) tasks, practicing appropriate responses with fewer verbal outbursts, and finding effective strategies for calming themselves using plant aromas or other sensory inputs. Each of these can be measured for outcomes.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.**

WebMD identifies vegetables/fruits that can be toxic including apple seeds and stone-fruit pits, elderberries, nutmeg, sprouted green potatoes, raw kidney beans, rhubarb leaves, cassava, raw lima beans and butterbeans, asparagus berries, tomato leaves, roots and stems, and some mushrooms depending on quantity (Reiff Ellis, 2023). Other vegetables to be aware of that may have some health risk - eggplant (high amounts of solanine), raw bean sprouts, and commercially grown lettuce with recalls for high e coli.

Assessment of participants or understanding of safety issue that may be present are the responsibility of the facilitator or hospital staff. Use of sharp garden tools, fertilizer or other potential ingestible products need to be considered, eliminated, or in locked storage if these may be a safety issue for individual participants or groups. Fountains and water features can promote disease and for some, suicide ideation.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** Using daily gardening tasks for TH programming in hospital settings can accomplish many purposes including health interventions, food production and garden maintenance. Additionally, allied health professionals supporting the program can expand their skills in TH and gardening furthering their professional development. There is structure to this format - the garden tasks need to be undertaken in a timely manner to optimize plant care and production. Participants will find this format unstructured in the sense that they will do a variety of garden tasks, different each day. Plant care for vegetables (peas, beans, cucumbers, carrots, beets, herbs) can underscore the importance of nurturing for both plants and people.

**REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:**

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- Lindsay, H. (2018). Nurturing mental health at Back to Our Roots Urban Farm. *Digging In*, 4(3).
- Lovezzo, A. (2023). Zone 5 – Monthly garden calendar: Chores and planting guide. Sowtrueseeds.com <https://sowtrueseeds.com/blogs/monthly-garden-schedule-by-zone/zone-5-monthly-garden-calendar-chores-and-planting-guide>
- Munson, J. (2023). [Therapeutic horticulture: A trauma-informed approach to mental well-being withing a psychiatric hospital](#). *Cultivate*, 3(2).
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Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.

