

Activity: Herbs Goal: Sensory Populations: Senior/Dementia

TH Activity Plan – Exploring the Five Senses with Herbs

Text by Amy Bruzzichesi, MSW

Photo by A. Bruzzichesi



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants engage all five senses interacting with fresh, dried, and prepared herbs in a social activity session.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Use thinking skills and clues to guess which herb is in the brown paper bag

Physical: Pass materials around the group; prepare tea

Psychological/Emotional: Reminisce & relax with the soothing aromas of herbs

Sensory: Engage taste, smell, sight, hearing & touch senses for sensory stimulation

Social: Socialize in a group setting; work cooperatively to solve sensory-focused challenges

Materials

Small herb pots with rosemary, mint, lavender, oregano, basil with clear labels

Paper bags with same herbs, dried, labeled on bottom only

Prepared sour cream or cream cheese dip containing oregano, rosemary, basil

Crackers

Iced or hot lavender mint tea, made with simple syrup infused with herbs

Cups, napkins, wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Purchase or propagate the herbs to go into 3-4” pots for easy passing between participants during session. Prepare paper bags with harvested and dried herbs or purchased dried herbs. Prepare crackers and dip. Make iced or hot tea and prepare for travel to site if needed (See “Materials” box for herb details).
2. Facilitator begins session by introducing the five herbs to the group by name and explains that five senses of *sight*, *touch*, *hearing*, *smell*, and *taste* will be used to fully experience the herbs.
3. Facilitator or assistant walks around the group with each herb pot, inviting participants to *see* and *touch* the plant. Some may choose to break off a leaf for closer inspection.
4. Introduce the brown paper dried herb bags and explain that using their sense of smell, each person will take a guess at the herb in the bag. Facilitator or assistant walks each bag around the group to invite participants to open the bag and smell the herb, then reveals the herb when the whole group has had a chance to do this step. Participants could also shake the bag to hear the dried herb inside.
5. Facilitator offers small plates with crackers and oregano-rosemary-basil dip for participants to taste the herbs, as well as cups of lavender-mint iced or hot tea.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This activity was developed as a sensory stimulation session used in a memory care facility with elders who ranged from conversant and interactive to nonverbal. Therapeutic goals for the group or individuals within the group can include sensory response, recognition of familiar herbs, memory recall (with or without prompts), reminiscence, social interaction, relaxation/behavior modification, and demonstration/practice of social skills. Some people living with dementia

will have compromised cognitive and memory abilities to recall (taste, memory, experience) and/or communicate. Facilitator will have knowledge of who these participants are and can modify activity with a focus on experiencing and relaxing with herb flavors and smells versus recalling or identifying herbs by name.

This sensory activity can also be the capstone of a season of growing these herbs in a facility courtyard garden, where residents can enjoy eating and drinking what they have grown all summer in a social setting as the growing season comes to an end, offering opportunities to reminisce about gardening, cooking, and entertaining.

This activity could be modified for use with other populations including people with sensorimotor skills challenges, who could for example, participate in blending herbs for a cracker dip or brewing the herbal tea as part of this type of TH activity or as a separate session or activity. Most populations can benefit from activities exploring herbs using the five key senses. Activities where tasting is a component of sensory stimulation are always popular regardless of age, abilities or TH settings.

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

Prior to session, approval from facility staff needs to be obtained for all participants to taste and eat session items. Sugar or other sweeteners (amount and actual product) for lemonade or tea may not be suitable for all participants (on strict dietary regimens or other). Participants may have swallowing, allergy or contraindications with medication issues. Occupational or speech therapists, trained in using thickeners for swallowing issues can be invited to co-treat and assist in the TH activity. It is not recommended that TH facilitators administer thickening agents; this is a liability concern.

Participants may be able to pass items among themselves, or may need a facilitator to move materials through the group. Use care if herbs are passed in breakable pots; consider plastic pots for this session. Consider rice crackers or soy dips if wheat or dairy sensitivities are a concern.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: The herbs listed in this activity were those grown in the courtyard garden at the facility where this activity was developed, and the combination mentioned here created a blend that was appropriate for a tea/lemonade and a cracker dip. Botanist M. Harankhedkar, Director of Horticulture identifies herbs that play double-duty - growing well in garden settings and offering sensory health benefits (2020).

A facilitator with food creativity and/or participants can experiment with any number of culinary herbs to come up with other combinations of ideas that would work, and could invite staff and family to join in as well, using herbs that are favorites of the residents, regional favorites, or those that grow best in the area or climate.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Bae, S. J., Lee, S. H., & Kim, D. S. (2021). The effect of horticultural therapy on cognitive function, depression, self-esteem and activity daily living (ADL) in dementia care-A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Korean Society of Rural Planning*, 27(4), 97-107.
- ElderGrow. (n.d.). Five senses activity kit. <https://www.eldergrow.org/5-senses-activity-kit/>
- Fleming, L. (2022). Relevancy of sense of taste to horticultural therapy. *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture*, 35(1), 33-40.
- Harankhedkar. M. (2020). Botanist's lens: Five senses, five herbs – Infinite connections! <https://www.historiclondontown.org/post/five-herbs>
- Heród, A., Szewczyk-Taranek, B., & Pawłowska, B. (2022). Therapeutic horticulture as a potential tool of preventive geriatric medicine improving health, well-being and life quality–A systematic review. *Folia Horticulturae*, 34(1), 85-104.

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.