

Activity: Plant Care Goal: Physical Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Guerilla Gardening

Text by L. Fleming, HTR & Maureen Bethel, BA, BEd, CAE

Photo by J. Fleming



Materials

Clipboard with paper & pen for planning

Variety of garden tools, including adaptive tools, plant markers

Containers for collecting weeds & plant rescue

Gloves, wipes, drinking water

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participant(s) reclaim a garden that has become overgrown.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Improve decision-making skills; explore adaptive tools & techniques for gardening; expand gardening knowledge of plant identification

Physical: Practice adaptive gardening techniques; increase physical exertion; increase level of functioning

Psychological/Emotional: Build self-confidence & interest in gardening; develop sense of self-worth & interest in gardening

Sensory: Improve proprioception & vestibular balance; increase tolerance for non-preferred tasks

Social: Work collaboratively with support person or group; maintain interests that support social interactions (i.e. garden clubs, groups)

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather tools & do a site assessment if possible.
2. Facilitator begins session by walking the garden with participant, brainstorming ideas for gardening during this session, engaging participant in the process.
3. Facilitator notes elements in reclaiming the garden such as: level of maintenance required, naturalizing some areas, gardening tasks that require extensive physical requirements (pruning tall hedges). Tips for adapting or modifying gardening can be shared (see below).
4. Facilitator & client agree on a plan for the session; what gardening tasks will be undertaken, what tools & techniques are best suited to accommodate participant's physical capabilities. Tasks are undertaken together.
5. A plan for future sessions or gardening by the participant on their own can be developed, with ideas for accommodating participant & their garden needs.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Several therapeutic goals can be integrated into a hands-on gardening TH session delivered one-on-one with a participant who is feeling the effects of aging related to changes in their physical abilities. Participants with overgrown gardens can become overwhelmed, particularly when physical abilities deteriorate. Their sense of confidence and previous interest in gardening can deteriorate, resulting in negative health impacts like reduced access to outdoors, physical exercise, and melatonin production. Providing adaptive gardening tips accompanied with hands-on practice, mindful of the participant's current physical and mental health, can guide the selection of a single garden bed for maintenance work for example. Using humor

and the term [guerilla gardening](#) can set the tone for working together in the garden where the overwhelming task becomes more manageable and actual gardening occurs.

Prior to beginning the gardening tasks, several points should be discussed. Is garden maintenance too much for participant; should volunteer or paid gardeners or landscapers be hired? If so, for what or all tasks? Should some areas be left to naturalize? What are the best short and long-term goals for the garden and gardener? Is the participant willing to adapt some gardening techniques and task?

Tips for guerilla gardening and [adaptive gardening](#) sessions:

- Prioritize tasks and garden areas;
- Not all the work has to be done in one session or day;
- Use both hands for gardening tasks; use lighter weighted tools;
- Modify reach, grip, bending, carrying and any gardening task with physical requirements;
- Carry materials in small amounts, weights, shapes;
- Use mulch to reduce weeds; solarize beds; reduce annual plantings – select perennials or naturalize areas of the garden (i.e. pollinator meadow);
- Assess levelness of ground and take care to have safe balanced position when gardening.

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

Assessment of the participant is recommended so adaptive tools and strategies can be individualized to improve outcomes and prevent pain or injury. Knowing their tolerances for tasks (and possibly pain), and their level of interest, will benefit them in the session and gardening at home. For example, some tools have sharp edges, can cut thick materials, but may be heavier than some people can manage.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Encourage participants to pay close attention to pain, swelling, and tiredness before, during, and after gardening activities; this aids in participants' exploration of their tolerance levels and for planning subsequent gardening tasks. Digging up sod that has overgrown a garden bed can be very labor intensive. Options like [solarizing bed](#), lawn alternatives (i.e. clover or moss), or hiring landscapers to undertake this task may be appropriate. Rock gardens or beds with sloped areas, or marshy wet terrain can be particularly challenging. Discussion with the participant on gardening in these areas may provide insights into their preferred plan, tasks, and safety concerns.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Fleming, L. & Morgan, S. (2024). [TH activity plan – Adaptive gardening: Repetitive motion disorders](#). University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database.
- Hoidal, N. (2025). [Using the sun to kill weeds and prepare garden plots](#). University of Minnesota Extension.
- Morgan, S.C. (2019). Considerations and adaptations to safely accommodate program participants. In Haller, Kennedy & Capra (Eds.), *The profession and practice of horticultural therapy*. CRC Press.
- Murza, G. (2024). [Preventing injury in the garden with tools, techniques, and stretches](#) [YouTube]. Florida Horticulture for Health.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.

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