

Activity: Plant Care Goal: Social Populations: Active Military/Veterans

## TH Activity Plan – Military Spouses Garden Club

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Photo by Fort Scott Biz



### Materials

Materials for given session  
(plants, seeds, soil)

Gloves, wipes

**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will attend a garden club specifically established for spouses of active military hosted at present station location.

### THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Build connections within the military community of spouses, recognizing social connections contribute to wellbeing; expand plant knowledge & skills

**Physical:** Increase physical activity as a health strategy

**Psychological/Emotional:** Expand sense of belonging as part of a community that empowers military spouses; cope with changing roles as single parent when spouse is deployed then as a family unit upon their return

**Sensory:** Participate in sensory activities involving plants as a strategy to increase joy

**Social:** Expand social network at current station location; become oriented to location; build comradery & support among military spouses

### STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Determine interest & need for this type of social engagement activity, & logistics for creating a garden club. Promoting & planning a Military Spouses Garden Club occurs prior to initial session.
2. Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants, explaining how the Garden Club will work - regularly scheduled sessions that people can participate as they choose, without pre-registration or commitment. Hands-on plant & garden activities are identified ahead of time, with delivery of these occurring at the identified location. Not all activities are gardening, but they will involve plants, or plant-based activity.
3. Activities that support networking should start each garden club session so that participants can make new social connections or strengthen ones already in place. This is followed by a short hands-on plant activity like: repotting plants for sale or personal use, planting seeds, making nature mandalas or nature frames, community service projects, or learning gardening/planting/pruning techniques.
4. Sessions conclude with feedback on session. (Did you meet some new people? Are you likely to attend another garden club session? Do you feel more a part of this community? How can the garden club foster the goal of connecting with other military spouses?). An invitation is extended to the next garden club session and its TH activity, identified ahead of session, along with a request for volunteers to assist with session (gathering materials, leading discussion, clean-up). Exchange of names may be appropriate.

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** Research has revealed that social connections contribute to wellbeing (O'Neal et al., 2020). Making connections for military spouses is particularly challenging when active military life involves multiple moves during a career for both military personnel and their families. Therapeutic horticulture can address facets of the transitional nature of military life in several ways including establishment of a garden

club as a recreational, educational or therapeutic platform. Some will not want to participate if it is presented as a therapeutic goal-driven session. However, a TH Garden Club can provide for multi-session programming that can have health benefits in several health domains, explicitly stated or not. The key focus is on providing a structure for supporting social connections using plant activities as the common theme. TH activities can also include supporting community service projects, and working towards positive functioning across health domains (Fleming, 2021). Structured along the lines of garden clubs in North America, with focus on plant knowledge, service projects and socialization, this particular type of garden club can be effective as evidenced by one set up at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia under the guidance of master gardener and HT practitioner Donna Hunt, former Combat Communications Officer. It can be set up to allow for ongoing changes of participants as people are transferred in or out of the community.

A garden club can empower military spouses by building, growing and fostering comradery and support between families while encouraging peer support, contributing to resiliency, helping to normalize experiences particularly for stressors associated with military members' frequent moves, multiple deployments, separations, and concerns for the safety and wellbeing of their spouse (Health.mil, 2024). Facilitator should be aware of the role rank plays in military life and communities including spouses and children, recognizing that the garden club will include a diverse group of military spouses.

The U.S. military uses the *social organization theory of action and change* that identifies processes (shared responsibility to support communities) and antecedents (resources and networks) that promote community capacity (Mancini & Bowen, 2013; Hanson, 2025). Prevention and intervention programming as well as multi-modal approaches can address issues that are relevant to this population of military spouses including promoting a sense of community, bridging gaps in families and communities, and supporting interpersonal relationships (Monk et al., 2023). This theory discusses maintaining wellbeing, solving problems, and building resiliency where the community is collectively competent. TH programs can be one such intervention. For serious mental health or other health issues, other types of therapy may be required. The TH Garden Club is not meant to be a mental health treatment service. These services are available elsewhere in military communities.

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

Facilitator should be alert to participants who may have mental health issues that may require professional services or referrals to other health providers for trauma, depression, addictions or abuse.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** Fostering community with this population of military spouses, where participation is ever-changing will be challenging. Therapists can use several techniques including development of a peer support program as part of the garden club, projects with a specific goal where all participants work towards accomplishing it (revitalizing a community garden or schoolyard), and opportunities for collaboration or group projects. [Promoting community stewardship](#), emphasizing shared values, being inclusive, creating an emotional and psychological connection with and between garden club participants, and [therapeutic alliance](#) between participants and therapist can also be valuable techniques for this type of plant-based programming.

**REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:**

- Fleming, L. (2021). [Horticulture for health framework](#). *Acta Horticulturae*, 1330. (Horticulture as social catalyst).
- Hanson, E. (2025). [Theory series: Social organization theory of action and change](#). *Militaryreach.auburn.edu*.
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- Monk, JK., Ruhlmann, L., Goff, BSN. et al. (2023). Translating discovery science. Fostering relationships: Service provider perspectives on community building among veteran families. *Fam Relat.*, 72(3).
- O'Neal, C.W., Richardson, E.W., & Mancini, J.A. (2020). Community, context, and coping: How social connections influence coping and well-being for military members and their spouses. *Family Process*, 59(1).

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