

Activity: Plant Care/Maintenance Goal: Cognitive/Intellectual Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Vocational Horticulture Tasks

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will gain experience in plant maintenance in a vocational horticulture program.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Prioritize & manage time & activities; set goals related to completing assigned tasks; learn new horticulture skills

Physical: Maintain & strengthen muscles; improve balance, endurance & stability

Psychological/Emotional: Strengthen rational thinking skills; manage challenges; increase confidence in a workplace/training setting

Sensory: Improve vestibular sense of balance

Social: Strengthen mentalization of being part of a work team, working with others; recognize their role & responsibilities as part of a greater whole

Materials

Garden or park & map

Gardening tools (pruners, loppers, soil, wheelbarrows, shovels etc.)

Paper, pens, whiteboard, chart, or visual for displaying assigned tasks

Gloves, wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Facilitator, in conjunction with garden maintenance manager, identifies areas where plant maintenance is required & suitable for participants to undertake.
2. Facilitator begins session by identifying horticulture tasks that need to be completed. Using a chart/visual instructions the group &/or individual participants discuss the tasks. Some tasks will be assigned & others can be selected by participants.
3. Facilitator identifies vocational goals of setting priorities, managing time & resources with practice for each. Participants are given time to think about & propose a plan of action for completing tasks. Tasks can include pruning a hedge at garden entrance, deadheading spent roses, mulching new bed, removing invasive vines from shrubs in children's garden, setting pumpkins in visitor center gardens in time for a special event.
4. Facilitator oversees the plans, guiding & mentoring each participant ensuring that there is no duplication of tasks, partnering people for 2-person tasks, confirming scope of task & suggesting time management.
5. Goal setting can be done for the group as a team &/or goal setting for each participant, along with expectations including participants' interpretation/implementation of tasks.
6. Concluding the session or day, the facilitator reviews the tasks & work completed, giving feedback on work performance, time management, prioritization of tasks, & goal setting.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Vocational horticulture programs are used with a variety of populations including youth interested in horticulture careers, incarcerated individuals expanding their skill set, people with addictions using physical activities as part of their recovery journey, and immigrant/refugee populations re-training where there are opportunities at public, botanical or government parks and gardens. With each population or individual, a focus on employment skills, attitudes and horticulture skills should be incorporated

into the program, usually delivered in multiple sessions. Important components, and skills that are transferrable to non-horticulture tasks, include time management, goal-setting and prioritization of tasks. How these are taught or delivered to participants will vary depending on their circumstances (no sharp tools at jail programs therefore no pruning tasks); horticulture knowledge prior to the vocational program (immigrant/refugee participants may have strong agriculture knowledge and experience from their home countries with knowledge transfer related to the use of horticultural tools and plants in the new plant zone and climate during vocational program); or previous work experience in other fields where time management and other skills have been developed and are now applied to plant-based settings.

Ideally, the multi-session vocational program would be explained so participants have a complete overview of all sessions, goals and time commitment. Some programs might incorporate professional horticulture association licensure, testing for certifications, or work towards high school credit. [Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association offers multiple certifications](#): certified professional horticulture, certified professional (landscape) installation, certified professional landscape maintenance, and certified professional irrigation. Most states have similar associations as well as arborist, irrigation or other horticulture related associations that may be willing to partner with vocational programs or offer educational/certification opportunities.

Therapeutic goals in other health domains can building work/vocational skills. Psychological domain goals can include improving rational thinking (choosing how to do plant maintenance tasks, tool selection), managing challenges and increasing confidence in workplace settings. Social skills in vocational horticulture programming can strengthen mentalization by being part of a work team, working cooperatively with others, recognizing and understanding their role in a work setting, and taking responsibility for assigned tasks, safety of others and as a contributor to a multi-phased, multi-tasked maintenance project.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Appropriate tools for each population or setting need to be determined during program planning phase. Some settings may not allow for sharp tools or certain heavy landscape equipment for example. Training on general safety, tool usage, and appropriate interactions with the public who may be in the garden/park setting while tasks are being completed should be part of the vocational program.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Vocational horticulture programs have been implemented at botanical gardens. Structured as a vocational program for immigrants and refugees where acclimation/cultural competency to American work environment was a goal, a partnership program between the Dallas Arboretum and Catholic Charities of Dallas Refugee Empowerment Services included - building self confidence in accomplishing horticultural tasks and working with peers, and learning job skills (operating equipment, doing horticultural tasks, working in an outdoor setting in varying weather conditions, following workplace safety practices, wearing clean uniforms, body cleanliness, and arriving to work on time). Learning interview skills, working with a team (eye contact, verbal communication, collaboration with others on shared tasks), working on tasks independently in a timely manner, and setting priorities/executive function skills were also part of the program. Many program clients were transitioning skills from previous agriculture work experience to horticulture experience, although some clients had no experience in working with plants or outdoor equipment.

The Growing Opportunities Gardening Program at the minimum-security detention center Girls Rehabilitation Facility in San Diego, CA, another example of a vocational horticulture program, uses formalized educational sessions, where participants are partnered with master gardeners to prepare beds, thin seedlings, harvest and manage pests, working on horticulture, social and employment skills.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association. (2024). [Certifications](#).

Gabrel, J. (2019). Program example: Vocational horticultural therapy correctional program for adolescent girls. In Haller, Kennedy & Capra (Eds.), *The profession and practice of horticultural therapy*. CRC Press. p247.

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