

# HORTICULTURAL THERAPY

---

## Cultivating Health and Harmony at the Riverview Nursing Home Rich Creek, Virginia

By **Mitchell L. Hewson HTM LT RAHP**

*Riverview is motivating and inspiring the residents, staff and volunteers with their Horticultural Therapy programs.*



*Jim Topping, Administrator*

Administrator Jim Topping, who was instrumental in completing the expansion of the facility over the last ten years, has championed yet another cause: implementing Horticultural Therapy programs to enrich residents' lives with meaningful activities and provide a sense of empowerment. Jim contacted Dr. Diane Relf at Virginia Tech regarding information on healing through nature. He then collaborated with Mitchell Hewson, a registered Canadian horticultural therapist, who began Horticultural Therapy training classes and workshops at Riverview in September 2007. They have never looked back: Jim's vision was now becoming a reality for Riverview. Indoor plants and outdoor gardens have become an integral part of the residents' lives, promoting dignity and quality of life. Participants are experiencing the beauty of nature through growing their own vegetables and herbs to creating wonderful projects to enhance wellbeing and self-esteem!

As a treatment method for long term care residents at Riverview, Horticultural Therapy is a valid, and becoming increasingly popular, intervention. Its positive effect on their residents, including those who suffer from various forms of dementia, is borne out by both anecdotal and empirical evidence. Through the use of "living" materials; flowering plants, fruits, vegetables and herbs, Horticultural Therapy stimulates thought, exercises the body and encourages an awareness of the external environment. Moreover, the elderly who have benefitted from this type of therapy report a renewed desire to live, decreased anxiety and improved self-esteem.



*Staff transplanting plants with residents*

Horticultural Therapy at Riverview is no doubt successful because of its client-centered approach. Known as “Rogerian Therapy,” any type of humanistic programming encourages the *person* to help him/herself. Treatment goals are established for each individual — unique to their needs and capabilities. In Horticultural Therapy classes, assessments and treatments are conducted in a natural environment: either an indoor plant area or outdoors in their garden beds. The staff (LPNs and horticultural therapy staff) assumes the dual role of therapist and horticulturalist.

Riverview staff are working towards a number of objectives geared toward improving the quality of life for elderly residents and those with dementia.

Typical objectives include:

- Determining the level at which each resident is functioning
- Providing a non-threatening area to enhance emotional well-being and reduce anxiety/stress levels
- Building self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment
- Stimulating the intellect by providing a variety of plants and activities
- Improving overall physical functioning
- Encouraging socialization
- Promoting collegiality and a sense of belonging
- Enhancing a sense of reality by validating such things as the season and time of year
- Minimizing the effects of dementia by providing release from depression and pain
- Providing an outlet for creativity and imagination
- Creating a pleasurable experience

#### ***The Hallmarks of Horticultural Therapy***

*There is something magical and curative about the powers of nature as seen in the growth of a plant. Flowers perpetuate themselves with their seeds, constantly repeating the cycle. Nature is forgiving; if a plant dies, another can be grown in its place.*

*M Hewson*

## **Environment**

---

Natural light is an important ingredient in an effective therapeutic program. Persons who are elderly require three times the amount of light for sight, depth perception and overall health and safety. In addition to these physical needs, the elderly also respond positively to natural light; studies have shown that light affects the body rhythms and Vitamin D levels.

In addition to the physical benefits of gardening, there are countless social and emotional benefits. As a character-builder, gardening improves self-esteem and restores confidence. As a memory-enhancer, it stimulates memories of former gardens and old skills. As a social activity, it provides an avenue for socialization and interaction.

With their wide variety of colors, scents and textures, Riverview’s outdoor gardens create a plethora of sensations, which stimulate mind and body.



*Beautiful vegetable garden adjacent to residents' rooms*

## Physical Functioning

Residents are safely bending, weeding, planting: as an activity, the act of gardening increases their upper and lower body strength and range of motion, encourages mobility, enhances circulation and cardiovascular ability, builds endurance and strength, and improves coordination. Before the Horticultural Therapy program commences, the physical capabilities of each Riverview resident is evaluated and individual regimes are established that will restore, improve, maintain or prevent muscle deterioration.

For those with physical limitations, the staff has adapted tools as well as garden beds and patio areas. Horticultural tasks are designed to suit each resident so that these will help them to develop fine motor skills such as eye/hand coordination. Residents learn many creative skills that stimulate the mind, body and soul, from Herbal Vinegars, Botanical Prints, Herbal Teas, and Plant Propagation, which stimulate their senses of touch, smell, visual, and hearing.



*Above: Botanical print cards made by residents*



*Left: Weeding the garden*

## Cognitive Functioning

Horticulture can play a major role in determining the cognitive level at which a resident is functioning. Using simple or complex procedural testing methods, residents can be evaluated on their ability to understand, concentrate, retain and interpret information. Through plant propagating, the therapist can determine a resident's ability to follow instructions. The garden and indoor environment set the tone for comprehension and realization. Working with seasonal plants helps residents validate the time of year and master the environment. The wide variety of plant shapes, sizes and colors help people with dementia "code" and perceive their environment (for example, yellow tulips planted outside a door can help a resident locate the entrance to the facility). Plants also provide an excellent source of visual, taste and touch stimuli. In addition, projects based around gardening and horticulture provide an awareness of time and seasonal events. During the winter, residents can plan their garden and select the plants they would like to grow. In spring and summer, they can plant seeds, transplant flowers, and maintain the gardens.



## Emotional Well-Being

Staff report that gardens and other plant areas at Riverview are positive, non-threatening environments, encouraging residents to share their feelings and emotions through group and individual interactions. Projects and activities such as cutting flowers, drying herbs and making wreaths helps improve skill levels, self-esteem and confidence. Tasks such as pruning, smashing pots and hoeing provide an outlet for anger and aggression. Classes in flower design and arranging offer opportunities for creativity and imagination. The simple act of working with plants develops a sense of nurturing. And, all types of tasks and projects provide structure and activity to help alleviate depression and alter negative feelings.

## Social Functioning

Riverview's Horticultural Therapy program is an excellent way for a therapist to build a good rapport with the resident as there is little or no direct confrontation. The therapist is able to rate the resident's social functioning level: Does the resident isolate himself/herself and work independently? Is the resident exhibiting socially appropriate behavior? Can the resident work with other group members? In sharing materials and tools in a group setting, members are able to interact with each other.

## Future Goals of Riverview's Horticultural Therapy Program

In 2009, Riverview built a state of the art greenhouse with the help of a grant through the American Horticultural Therapy Association. With the addition of the greenhouse, this enabled residents to do Horticultural Therapy throughout the winter months. This program will become a major part of the residents' treatment through the many horticultural sessions such as aromatherapy, creative arts, and guided visualization. These programs are designed to engage a resident's interest, match their capabilities and foster creativity and imagination. Horticultural tasks and projects reflect seasons and seasonal events to support nurturing, self-development and change. Yes, Riverview is cultivating health and harmony through the use of nature to nurture mind, body and soul!



*Mitchell Hewson with Riverview Staff and participants during Creative Arts and Guided Imagery class.*

*L to R Front Row: Monnie Martin, Piney Perkins, Sharon Miller, Silvia Terry.*

*L to R Back Row: Katrina Mathena, Joyce Stitt, Barbara Lester, Terri Patterson*