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FINDING HEALING THROUGH HORTICULTURE

Digging in the dirt can bring back happy memories for dementia patients



Judy Mazzarella waters the flowers at Poet's Walk Fredericksburg.

By Cathy Dyson

Eating a ripened tomato, fresh off the vine, might be the best reward for gardening, but it's certainly not the only benefit, especially for seniors with Alzheimer's.

www.PoetsWalk-SpringHills.com



Rosita Jonsson, Barbara Rodgers and Dollie Rose tend to squash and cucumber plants at Poet's Walk Fredericksburg.

Simply engaging those with dementia in gardening is “a great form of physical exercise as well as therapeutic for the mind, body and soul,” said Anna Gatewood, a director at Poet's Walk Fredericksburg.

The facility provides care for those with memory issues and offers a Signature Touches program that includes exercise and therapies related to aromas and horticulture, music and art.

“It's all about being creative, fun and excited about wellness, especially as the days grow hotter,” Gatewood said.

Poet's Walk has an aeroponic tower garden that keeps the residents out of the heat on sweltering summer days. An advanced form of hydroponics, aeroponics is the process of growing plants in an air or mist environment rather than soil, according to the Tower Garden website.

Poet's Walk uses a vertical system to grow its fruits and vegetables, including tomatoes and squash.



When the weather is perfect for gardening, residents can work on flower beds or growing herbs and spices in three raised beds. What's grown on the premises is eaten there as well as part of a farm-to-table approach.

Gardening has several mental and physical benefits to people whose memory issues interfere with their ability to function on a daily basis, according to the website Alzheimer's.net. In the United States, 5.7 million people have Alzheimer's, and the number is expected to reach almost 14 million by 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Dementia-related diseases kill 1 in 3 seniors, the association states, more than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined.

Those with memory impairments tend to become more withdrawn and paranoid as the disease progresses, and there's often little joy left in their world, according to Alzheimer's.net. Digging in the dirt can help resurrect some of those happier times.

"Gardening therapy may help people recall those pleasant long-term memories and bring them back to a healthier time," the website stated.

Gardening benefits include:

- Allowing loved ones to experience success, ultimately building confidence
- Boosting energy levels and promoting a good night's sleep
- Creating a sense of community of gardening with others
- Creating a sense of purpose for a loved one faced with Alzheimer's
- Great exercise for the mind and body
- Helping to maintain an existing skill set



Studies also have shown that gardening can reduce pain, improve attention, lessen stress, agitation and falling and even lower the need for certain medications such as anti-psychotics, according to a report published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information.

Alzheimer's.net offers some tips for caregivers interested in providing a garden for a dementia patient. They include:

- Avoid giving someone with Alzheimer's any sharp gardening tools.
- Build raised beds so that gardening is more accessible and enjoyable.
- Create a garden in the shape of a figure eight, as dead end gardens can cause confusion.
- Ensure all plants are non-toxic.
- Garden early in the morning to avoid the hottest times of the day.
- Keep it fun and light-hearted.
- Provide adequate sunscreen and a hat to protect your loved one from the sun.
- Try planting a container garden, to make the activity more accessible for a senior.