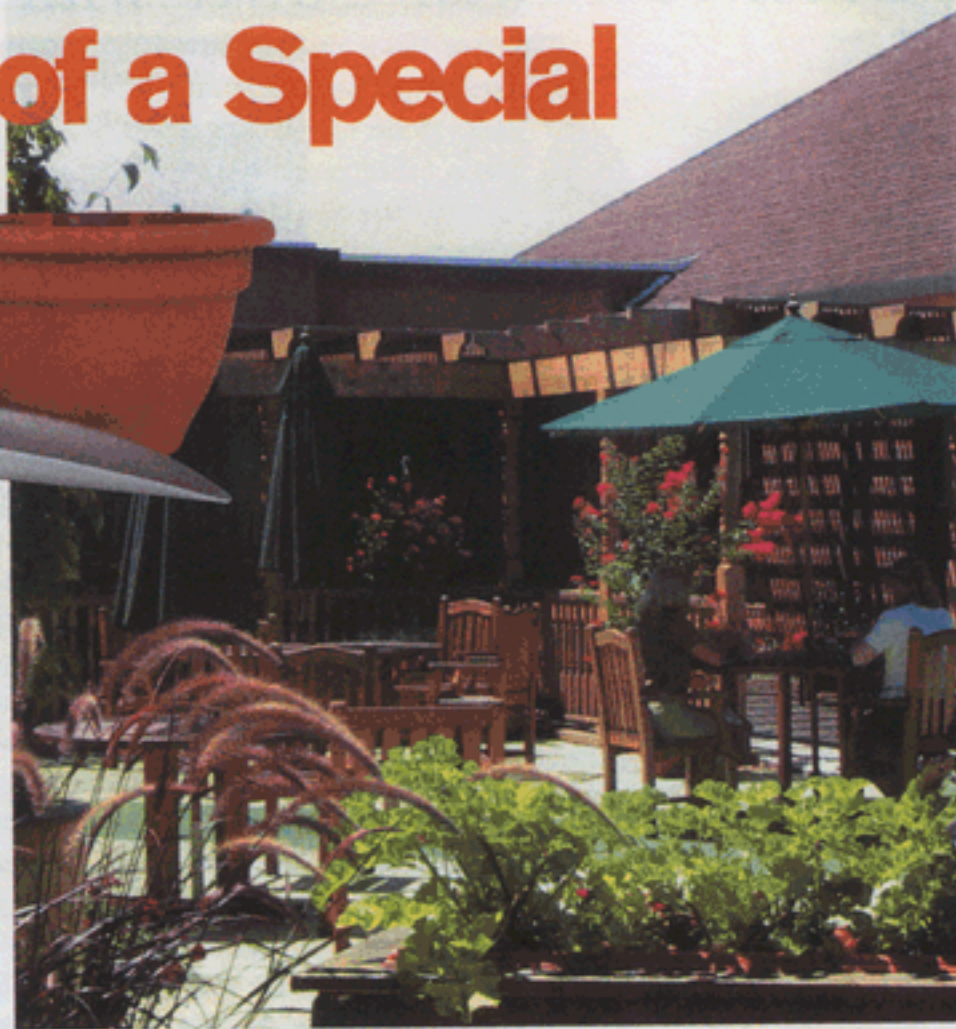


The Care and Use of a Special Needs Garden

MAKING THE MOST OF PLANNED ACTIVITIES IN THE GARDEN

When an older adult is moved from his home to a special care residence, such as a memory care facility or an assisted living community, the transition can be physically and emotionally difficult. An accessible, outdoor area at the facility that closely resembles a person's garden or backyard can make the transition much easier. That garden can make the person feel more comfortable and "at home." It is also important to note that the design and function of the outdoor space can critically affect whether the garden is regularly enjoyed by the community of older adults. Having visited many Special Needs Gardens in communities offering independent living, assisted living, nursing care and continuing care throughout the United States, it is apparent that many are not being used to their full potential.



Early thinking in the design of a Special Needs Garden led to constructing circular paths that led older adults effortlessly and safely through an outdoor space. Many times the circular path was constructed with bright, glaring concrete and added very little useful design to the garden. Individuals could go outside to an enclosed, secure space, but the bare white concrete would reflect the sunlight and produce a glare uncomfortably bright to the older adult. Early designs also included plant materials that were nondescript, and there were few familiar and stimulating garden ornaments. As time has passed, the thinking has changed, and we are now finding that Special Needs Gardens are being viewed as part of the integral overall design of the building itself rather than afterthoughts or add-ons. However, "how and when" the gardens are being used is still not an important part of the planning process.

Goals for Special Needs Gardens

When planning a Special Needs Garden, the goal should be to create a beautiful outdoor environment, as well as a place that can be safely used and enjoyed by all the residents. A successful garden design encourages individuals to spend time in the garden and participate in planned activities. Gardening can be therapeutic and stimulating. There should be an area in the garden where staff, residents and family members can get their hands in the soil. A garden in a senior residence can become a focal point of the community. Benefits extend beyond social gratification to physical, psychological and even spiritual growth.

Offer opportunities to rest and socialize in the early morning breezes or in the shade of a summer's afternoon with comfortable, appropriate furnishings. Remember, however, sunlight reflecting off of the surfaces of furnishings (or pathways, as we mentioned) will usually discourage an older adult from using the garden. And, if there are any communication difficulties, the resident may not be able to articulate that it is uncomfortable or even painful to go outside into the garden.



Awnings at the entrance of the garden will allow an older adult to venture forth. Trees can provide shade along the walking path and are nature's air conditioners, lowering the temperature of the air to as much as five degrees cooler under the tree canopy. Perimeter enclosures such as fencing can help screen out unwanted distractions and prevent individuals with memory impairments from straying into unsafe areas.

Not too long ago, a friend was in the process of making the difficult decision to move her father from an out-of-state assisted living residence offering memory care, to one that was located close to her family. She was very concerned about accessibility to a secure outdoor garden. In the early to middle stages of her father's dementia, he needed a secure outdoor garden in which to walk safely and expend pent-up energy generated by this devastating disease. There may be others like my friend who have the same important need when assessing memory care facilities for their parents with Alzheimer's and dementia related diseases.

Advantages to Body, Mind and Spirit

Besides enjoyment and positive distraction, a Special Needs Garden can offer additional health benefits. Just 15 minutes in bright daylight provides natural absorption of vitamin D. Daily or frequent use of the garden will help regulate and balance an individual's circadian body rhythms so they sleep and wake more naturally. A pleasant view of nature, even through a window, can have a positive effect on recovery from an illness. Roger Ulrich, an environmental psychologist at Texas A&M University, came to this conclusion after studying individuals recovering from surgery.

Margaret Stanley, RNC, nurse manager of the dementia unit at Medford Leas Continuing Care Retirement Community, Medford, N.J., has noticed that the residents are "more engaged" when they are outside in the garden. "You can see a more relaxed change in the facial expressions and posture of the residents," she says.

