

Home & Garden

Home & Garden Editor Karen Kennedy-Hall

Gardens that heal

For the elderly, ill and disabled, getting outdoors can be therapeutic

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The back porch garden at Medford Leas community center wasn't much to look at before Jack Carman came along.

Residents and employees at the continuing-care facility rarely ventured into the barren courtyard. The only thing to look at was some air-conditioning and maintenance equipment.

Last year, the outdoor space got a makeover, thanks to Carman, a Medford landscape architect who specializes in designing therapeutic gardens for the elderly.

Therapeutic gardens, or healing gardens, are designed around clients' needs, making them accessible and interesting to the elderly, sick or disabled.

Today, the back porch garden is full of green, growing things — flowers, herbs and vegetables. It attracts birds, butterflies and, most importantly, the facility's residents.

Research shows sick people who are exposed to nature get better faster, Carman said. Studies also show sunlight and the outdoors reduce high blood pressure and relieve stress.

"This stuff is good for you, bottom line," said Carman, whose wife is a gerontologist at Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Cherry Hill.

Gardening is therapeutic for people of all ages, said Stephen M. Scheinthal, a geriatric psychiatrist for Kennedy Health System



Gladys Lawson (left) and Marion Sandman, both residents of Medford Leas, work on flower boxes of New Guinea Impatiens. The plants will be transplanted to hanging baskets.

and director of the University of Medicine and Dentistry's Center for Aging in Stratford. It's been used in mental health therapy for at least 200 years. Increasingly, as better elder care facilities are built, gardening is included in the

landscape planning, said Scheinthal, who praised Carman's work.

Therapeutic gardens offer a safe, attractive environment where the elderly can feel grass between their toes, the breeze in their hair, the sun in their face.

"None of us want to be confined inside," said Scheinthal. "We have this very intimate sensory connection with nature that you can't replicate in a building."

For the elderly with dementia, gardening is also one of the most effective ways to recall comforting childhood memories. Edible plants with strong smells like herbs and tomato plants are particularly important because they safely stimulate sight, smell, touch and taste.

"There's a freedom about that," said Scheinthal. "It's a good

Working outside in the garden can also lift the spirits of the elderly

Continued from Page 1C

quality of life experience."

The courtyard at Medford Leas is enclosed, an important feature for Alzheimer's patients who tend to wander. It is wheelchair-friendly and is easily accessed by double-glass doors off a well-used activity room.

The doors open onto a partially covered patio where comfortable, sturdy wood furniture invites visitors to sit a spell. Because it takes older eyes several minutes to adjust to light changes, Carman sheltered the patio to ease the transition into sunlight. White concrete was painted green to reduce glare.

Colorful containers of flowers and trees bloom everywhere. A trickling fountain, wind chimes and a Chinese gong attract attention, too.

A gently curving path leads visitors deeper into the garden, where vegetables, trees, perennials and herbs are tended by the community's horticulturists and residents.

Ellinor Hasson, 72, never gardened before coming to Medford Leas, but on a recent sunny day, the resident planted New Guinea impatiens in containers to mount along a wall in the back porch garden.

"I'm a girl from Brooklyn; I used to take the subway," Hasson said. "It's a wonderful thing to see things grow. Now that I'm retired, I can do all these nice things. It's really a pleasure."

More nursing homes and continuing-care facilities are catching on to the concept of designing gardens around the needs of their residents. It's not only good for patients, but good for business, said Carman. Walking paths, raised planters, benches for conversation, bird

feeders and bird houses become a marketing plus.

The Angel Garden at Promise Alternative Care in Cherry Hill is used on pleasant days by the day care's 40 clients. Designed by Carman especially for Alzheimer's patients, the garden is enclosed and provides space for exercising, cookouts or just drinking iced tea.

The fresh air, breezes and trees are comforting to the facility's clients, said administrator Kathy Licardo.

"It's very cathartic, very soothing," Licardo said. "When they get inside, they can get very anxious. This provides a warm, nurturing environment that calms them."

Debbie Lux, a horticulturist at Medford Leas, runs programs to get residents' hands dirty and encourage them to go outside. Since the back porch garden was installed last summer, she has seen more residents venture outdoors.

But the garden has done more than that, she said. It has also encouraged people to interact and try new things.

"It's not just about gardening," said Lux, while gathering containers and potting soil for a gardening class. "It's about getting residents to work together on projects."

Nature is good for the body, said Carman. Gardens encourage exercise. Exposure to sunlight helps bodies manufacture vitamin D, making bones stronger.

People stuck inside all day start to get their days and nights mixed up. Getting outside helps restore that balance.

Gardening is good for the mind, too. Residents can continue their lifelong interests in bird-watching. Caring for growing things keeps them interested in life.

Healing gardens at home or in adult communities, nursing homes or continuing-care facilities make nature accessible.

"Just because you get older doesn't mean you have to stop gardening," Carman said.