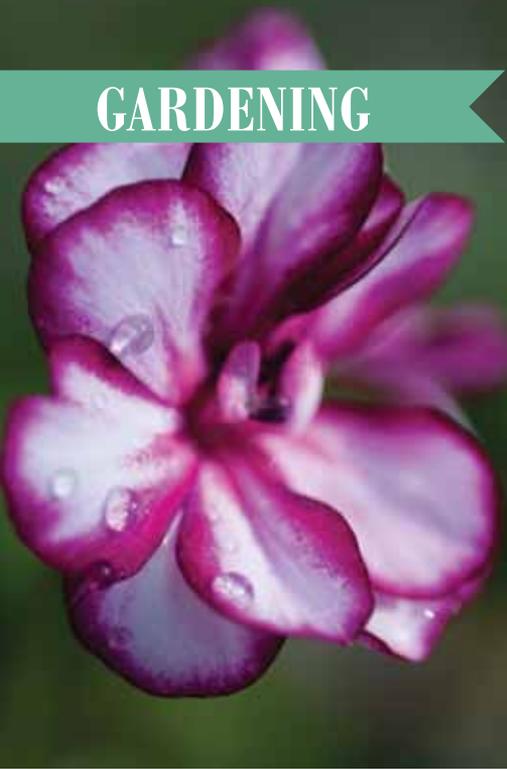


GARDENING



James Ligumira presents a piece of his labors in one of the Salem Veteran's Administrations Medical Center's greenhouses. The flowers across the top of the page are also grown there.

SALEM VETERANS ADMINISTRATION MEDICAL CENTER

Gardener's Paradise

Who knew that in addition to offering a broad variety of plants at great prices, the Salem VA Medical Center also uses its plantings as job training for veterans.

BY SUSAN SHONE
PHOTOS BY
DAVID HUNGATE

Where is your current favorite place to shop for healthy, affordable plants, shrubs or trees for your home garden? Whether it's the garden center of one of the big box stores or a locally owned nursery, there's another place you might want to add to your go-to list: the greenhouse on the grounds of the Salem Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

That's right: our local VA Hospital offers a stunning variety of healthy plants, all of them already selected for their ability to thrive in our growing region, and all of them at very fair prices. Need another reason to shop there? The staff of the greenhouse – the folks who grow, tend and sell the plants – are veterans who reap many benefits by working there, and who offer knowledgeable and excellent customer service.

And the greenhouse has a fascinating and ambitious project planned for its future.

FOR THE HOME GARDENER

The greenhouse is open year-round, and although the plants offered for sale vary according to the season, a visit to the greenhouse during any time of year can be enjoyable. On any given visit you might see unexpected treasures (like banana trees or miniature, fruit-bearing pomegranate plants) in addition to what you came for,

so the greenhouse is always fun to explore.

Customers are welcome to walk through the greenhouses, and the staff will give you solid gardening advice if you ask. Some plants for sale are started from seeds, others from cuttings or division, and the rest – including all the plants under patent – the greenhouse purchases as small rooted plants called “plugs.” At the appropriate planting times throughout each year, the greenhouse offers annuals, perennials, herbs, fruits, vegetables and shrubs.

And the sheer number of plants to choose from isn't shabby: the greenhouse's 2011 Price List has more than 400 different annuals alone, from *Ageratum Aloha Blue* to *Zinnia Star Orange*. That same 2011 list also boasts 38 luscious-sounding varieties of tomato plants, a local favorite.

The greenhouse does not, however, sell planting supplies like potting soil or planters; focusing as they do on the nursery stock means you'll have to shop for things like mulch or clay pots elsewhere.

Prices for almost all the plants at the greenhouse range from \$2 for a 4 pack of plants to \$10. A few specialty items and large plants can cost up to \$50, but the vast majority of the greenhouse's prices are modest.

The greenhouse celebrated Valentine's Day with a flower sale, held during the two days before the big day in the lobby of the VA hospital.

GARDENING



Salem VAMC greenhouse staff mix their own potting soil.

FOR THE FUTURE

The greenhouse courtyard sports several recent additions as the result of “community engagement,” another way the greenhouse interacts with the Roanoke Valley area. Groups including girl scouts, boy scouts and students from Faith Christian School have all been welcomed to the greenhouse. While there, some learned about plants and others completed special permanent projects for the courtyard.

One of those projects is the Family Garden, constructed by the senior girl scouts as a respite for the families of veterans who might be spending the bulk of a day at the hospital. The greenhouse provided the plants and the girl scouts provided all of the other materials themselves through fundraisers. If you tour the Family Garden yourself (highly recommended!), you’ll see vertical gardens, a giant (and playable) checkers board, a garden planted to attract butterflies, and a Zen sand garden complete with rakes.

But the Salem VA greenhouse has even bigger plans. Taking the idea of horticulture therapy to a new frontier, Sandy Lane and Dr. Mark Detweiler, a psychiatrist at the Salem VA, have been working together to plan and secure funding for the Therapeutic Garden Project, something they are very excited about – and for good reason: nothing like it currently exists at any VA hospital in the United States.

Studies and personal observation both indicate that exposure to gardens and being in outdoor settings are helpful for rehabilitation in many ways. The list of potential benefits to patients with access to garden settings is impressive: patients could recover faster, need less pain medication, have improved concentration, experience less stress and agitation, have lower blood pressure, have improved moods, have fewer falls, have shorter hospital stays, and suffer less depression. Hospitals could even enjoy lower staff turnover, since the staff could visit on-site gardens, too, and the patients they treat could be calmer and more contented. Having a garden on the hospital premises and integrating time within it into patients’ treatment plans could very well save money while simultaneously improving lives.

Knowing this, Lane and Detweiler worked with Jack Carman, a landscape architect who has been designing therapeutic gardens across America for more than 20 years. Carman visited the Salem VA several times, meeting with VA staff with differing areas of expertise, such as providing physical therapy or treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Carman let the medical professionals tell him what the patients in their various specialties needed, then designed individual therapeutic gardens according to the VA staff’s assessments and requests. These individual gardens

would exist side by side in the greenhouse courtyard; together as a whole, they would comprise the Therapeutic Garden. If you look at the full-color blueprint Carman designed, you’ll begin to understand the scope of the Therapeutic Garden Project and just how special it is; you can ask to see it at the greenhouse.

To illustrate, just three of the individual gardens planned for the Therapeutic Garden are:

- A Physical Therapy Garden, where patients can do their physical therapy exercises outdoors. It will even be wheelchair-accessible, so veterans in wheelchairs can use it for their physical therapy, too.

- A Memory Support Garden, for patients dealing with memory-loss conditions, including Alzheimer’s. For the safety of the patients, it will be enclosed and will contain only non-toxic plants. It will have plenty of shade, since as people grow older it takes more time for their eyes to adjust to bright daylight. Even the concrete will be tinted so as to reduce glare and provide a more comfortable environment. And there will be familiar objects present, like birdhouses, to stimulate memory and provide reassurance.

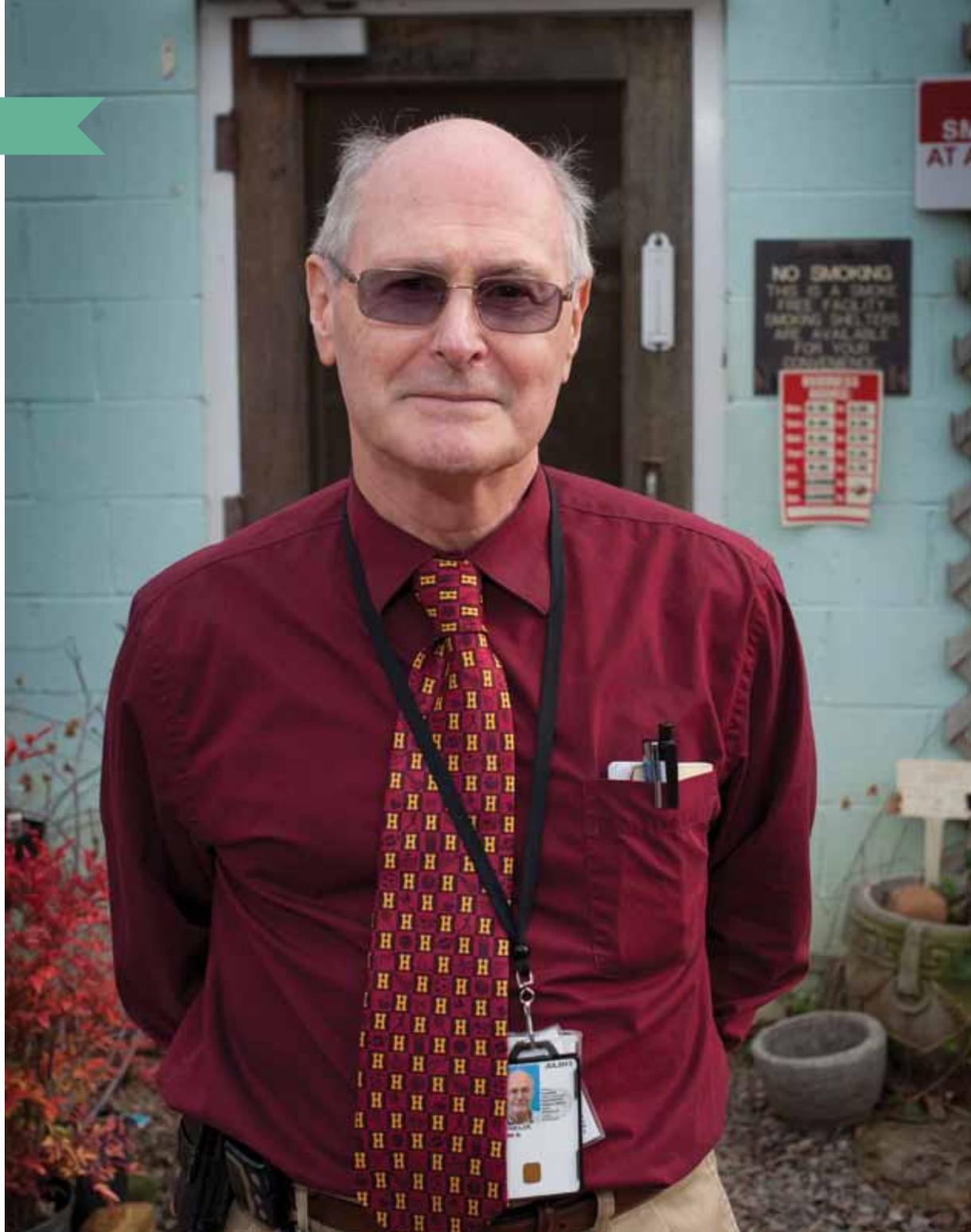
- A Labyrinth Garden, designed to calm the mind, as opposed to a maze, which is meant to confuse the mind. The labyrinth is composed of circuits or paths, which one follows to the center of the labyrinth. The process of walking the circuit is a meditative process which results in stress reduction and is very useful in treating patients with PTSD.

It has been Dr. Detweiler’s dream to build the Therapeutic Garden Project for 10 years, and it is no less important to Sandy Lane. The two plan to pay for the entire cost of constructing the Therapeutic Garden with money from grants and donations; it will cost the Salem VA or the federal government nothing. Many local organizations have made donations toward the building of the Therapeutic Garden or indicated an interest in volunteering with construction and maintenance of the project. While Lane waits to find out if grants she’s already applied for are awarded for the project, she will continue applying for other grants. There’s little doubt that the day construction begins for the Therapeutic Garden will be a happy one for Lane and Detweiler.

Along with the benefits the Therapeutic Garden would provide for the patients and staff of the Salem VA, Dr. Detweiler would like to make it available to medical providers and scientists outside of the VA, as a place to do research on the effects of therapeutic gardens. Lane points out that therapeutic gardens could be effective additions not only to VA and general hospitals, but also to schools and the offices of doctors and dentists. Any way you look at it, the farseeing vision being pursued at the Salem VA is a win-win. ☆

GARDENING

Therapeutic Garden Project proponent Dr. Mark B. Detweiler worked for more than 10 years to see the project come to fruition.



Salem VAMC Greenhouse: Getting There

Fair warning: If you've never been there before, the greenhouse can be a little hard to find: Once on the Salem VA campus, get on Patriot Circle. Stay on this street and look for two signs identifying the greenhouse and its hours. The greenhouse is near Building 8 and not far from the VA's water tower. Turn onto Garden Square and drive up to the archway; it's posted with a stop sign advising you to stop and sound your horn before going through. The one-way lane will take you straight

to the customer parking spaces. Before you even reach the parking spaces, you'll see several large greenhouses and an area laden with plants out in the open within the large courtyard.

1970 Roanoke Blvd., Salem, VA 24153

540-982-2463 ext. 2218

Open Monday-Friday from 8 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

Accepts Credit Cards, Debit Cards, Checks and Cash



Why the Gardens are There

As wondrous a place for gardeners as the VA greenhouse is, it was created to help veterans, both in the rehabilitation process and in teaching valuable and transferable job skills, and this remains its primary concern today. The greenhouse and the jobs available within it are part of the VA's Compensated Work Therapy Program (CWT).

Sandy Lane, the CWT and IT (Incentive Therapy) program coordinator, worked in the wholesale nursery business before coming to the Salem VA to head up the CWT/IT program. And Lane can arrange paid work experience for veterans in other VA hospital environments as well, such as the carpenter shop, warehouse, dietetics and housekeeping. CWT positions pay veterans \$7.25 per hour. In addition to the work experience, veterans in the CWT program have access to vocational services, including training in computer skills and help with resume writing, interviewing and the job search.

"The goal is for the veteran to find competitive employment in the community," Lane says.

Veterans don't have to worry about discovering the CWT program on their own or how they can qualify to participate in it. According to Lane, various health care providers at the VA – primary care physicians, physician's assistants, nurse practitioners and social workers

– refer veterans to the program.

"The veterans must be unemployed and interested in seeking employment," says Lane, with priority given to veterans who are homeless or have no income.

"I have had really good luck in finding veterans who enjoy working with plants and get satisfaction from helping the customers," she says.

If after seeing the greenhouse, you need any more proof of the green thumbs the veterans there acquire, just look at the wider Salem VA campus: "Veterans at the greenhouse take care of all of the flower beds and often assist with landscaping and pruning on the grounds," Lane says.

The greenhouse veterans pick up lifelong horticulture know-how and sometimes horticulture-related hobbies. Over time, Lane relates, veterans "start to develop a comfort level working with their peers. The customers are always friendly, and to help someone find the items they are looking for and express their appreciation with a smile and a 'thank you' is very rewarding."

The program has an excellent success rate. Lane says every veteran who has entered the program wanting a job has found one. And if you shop at the greenhouse, you'll appreciate knowing that all the money made from its sales goes right back into the CWT program. –SS

Sandy Lane, who runs the Salem VAMC greenhouse, cites veterans' commitment and customers' friendliness as important aspects of program success.