

Native Delaware: UD combines nature and therapy for mentally ill

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When we're having a bad day, many of us intuitively seek relief in nature, whether that means a hike in the woods, quick stroll through the park, or merely adding a green plant to an otherwise sterile work cubicle.

Scientists would say we're doing the right thing. A slew of studies indicates that interaction with nature reduces stress and anger, improves cognitive performance and increases one's sense of connection to the world.

For those who are experiencing more than just a bad day and suffer from depression or other mental illnesses, the benefits of nature may be even greater.

The University of Delaware's Cooperative Extension and Longwood Graduate Program in Public Horticulture recently began helping clients of the state's Department of Health and Social Services enjoy the uplifting benefits of nature. They developed plans for a therapeutic and community garden on DHSS's Holloway campus, on the du Pont Highway, north of New Castle. Partners in the project include the Delaware Department of Agriculture, UD's Center for Disability Studies, Delaware Center for Horticulture and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The Longwood Fellows took on the garden design as their annual professional outreach project. But even before a single design was sketched, Extension and ag department professionals worked on an education program for the clients.

"We offered workshops to develop interest in gardening," says Carrie Murphy, horticulture agent for New Castle County Extension. "There was already a lot of interest; in fact, the clients wanted to begin growing vegetables immediately. So we designed and planted a 20-by-30-foot vegetable garden at the Holloway campus this past summer and showed the clients how to prep the soil, plant, weed, compost and harvest."

First-year crops included popcorn, pumpkins, sweet corn and sunflowers. Thursday has become "Garden Day" when Extension and dept of agriculture staff and Master Gardeners offer structured activities at the Holloway campus. One week, Master Gardener Hetty Francke gave a composting demonstration; another week entomologist Brian Kunkel discussed how to tackle garden pests.

Even now, Garden Day continues. One recent Thursday, UD entomologist Heather Disque gave a talk on where bees spend the cold-weather months.

Holloway clients and employees provided input into the therapeutic garden's design. The fellows organized a design charrette, a brainstorming session with Holloway clients and other stakeholders, plus representatives from the horticulture community. The fellows also held informal focus groups on the Holloway campus.

One thing they quickly discovered, says fellow Rebecca Pineo, was the clients' wish to memorialize individuals buried in a nearby potter's field. So the garden design maintains open sight lines to this field from the main garden area.

In addition, the clients will be creating garden art in on-site ceramic studios; some of these works may be utilized for memorial purposes.

Before hitting the drawing board, the fellows also researched existing therapeutic gardens. A few traveled to the Buehler Enabling Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden, which is considered a model in engaging people of all abilities in gardening.

And all 10 fellows visited Philadelphia's Friends Hospital, which has had a therapeutic garden on site since 1817.

The final design that the Longwood Fellows created splits the one-acre garden into quadrants that feature raised beds and green walls. One quadrant will have a slate wall for chalk art, an idea suggested by clients.

The design also includes a woodland walk, an avenue of mixed-species trees and two shaded plazas, which can be used for everything from picnic lunches to workshops. Smaller, semi-enclosed seating nooks appear perfect for contemplation.

Sustainable landscaping practices were incorporated into every facet of the garden design, says the department of agriculture's Faith Kuehn, a project leader. The garden design includes native plants whenever possible, uses some recycled materials for garden hardscapes, designates rain collection in barrels and by other means, incorporates a composting station and utilizes solar and other green technologies.

"This project helped me learn about working with a lot of different people," Pineo says. "We had multiple partners and each partner brought different work styles, perspectives and creativity. It was challenging but it was a good lesson in the strength you can get from partnerships."

"It's been a win-win situation for all involved," says Bob Lyons, director of the Longwood Graduate Program. "The therapeutic and community garden has great potential to improve the experience of the clients of the Holloway campus; it also served to grow the fellows' experience in coordinating focus groups, design charrettes and conceptual designs."

Although the educational piece of the project is well underway, the therapeutic garden is still just a design on paper. The project team is seeking donations and grants.

To learn more about the garden, contact Murphy at cjmurphy@udel.edu or 831-COOP or Kuehn at Faith.Kuehn@state.de.us or 698-4587.

Native Delaware is a weekly column by the university's Cooperative Extension on First State plants, animals and weather. McDonough is a communications specialist for the University of Delaware. To suggest a topic or ask a question, please contact her at 831-1358 or margomcd@udel.edu.