

Horticultural therapy blooms at Rose Villa senior community

Created on Wednesday, 10 June 2015 01:00 | Written by [Ellen Spitaleri](#) | 

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Melodie Reid is always looking for better ways to get to know the residents at Rose Villa, and she has found that perfect match with horticultural therapy.



PHOTOS BY ELLEN SPITALERI - From left, Kate Bodin, associate director of Earthtones Music Therapy Services, intern Sandra Galli, Melodie Reid, activities and volunteer coordinator at Rose Villa, and resident Nancy Bosh check out the fast-growing peas in the courtyard garden boxes. The garden boxes are easily accessible to residents with mobility issues.

“It sparks cognitive stimulation, and that is really important for folks with dementia,” said Reid, the activities and volunteer coordinator at the continuing care retirement community on River Road in Oak Grove.

When residents get the chance to interact with plants in a garden or a tree in a pot, “they can still recall memories. They will say ‘I know what that is.’ And in that moment with that flower or that tree I will hear special stories.”

She added, “I see another side of them, and I get to know them better and provide better care for them.”

In order to bring horticultural therapy to Rose Villa, Reid partnered with Earthtones, a Southeast Portland-based music-therapy organization that has branched out and added horticulture therapy to its services.

Many senior-living communities have garden boxes, and Rose Villa is no exception, but Reid wanted her residents to have more; she wanted “a nature experience with meaning behind it,” she said.

In January, Reid used money from her activities budget to bring Sandra Galli, a horticultural intern with Earthtones, to Rose Villa, where she has supervised the planting of three raised-bed gardens in the courtyard at the facilities.

She comes once a week to Rose Villa and spends two hours interacting with residents. For the first hour, she meets with five or six residents, who may have mobility issues, in their rooms, bringing with her plants and flowers.

A group session occupies her second hour, when she and 10 residents talk about what is in bloom, plant seed starts, make flowering baskets and do crafts using natural materials.

On Arbor Day, Galli brought in potted trees, including a coastal redwood, which caught the eye of one of the residents.

“She said she met her husband at a picnic at Yellowstone, under a sequoia. It brought back a precious memory for her, and the way she described it, you could just see her and her husband under the tree,” Galli said.

‘Power of plants’

“I believe in the power of plants; the whole process of it. I’ve seen the inherent quality of plants and their health properties, and through that and my work with people, I’ve seen the benefits very quickly,” Galli said.

“I used to own a neighborhood nursery in Northeast Portland, and I loved it, but I closed it, because I made the decision to take plants to a different level,” she said.

Galli earned a degree in gerontology and has been interning with Earthtones for nearly a year.

“It has been an amazing experience, and now I have a new career working with plants on this level, and I happen to love it,” she said.

Nancy Bosh, a resident at Rose Villa since 2007, also happens to love working with plants and is very involved with the garden boxes in the courtyard.

“I like to get in the soil and get close to it. My parents had a big garden, and I was allowed to work in it,” she said, adding that she and her parents picked and preserved fruit, berries and annual vegetables.

Her favorite flower to grow is geraniums, Bosh said, because they have such fragrant leaves.

Horticulture, music align

Kate Bodin, a certified music therapist, registered horticultural therapist and the associate director of Earthtones Music Therapy Services, said she met the CEO of Earthtones, Jodi Winnwalker, three years ago, when she signed on to that organization.

Now that they have added horticultural therapy to their services, they have about 150 clients that they meet with over the course of a month.

Clients range from large communities like Rose Villa, where they may specialize in memory care or wellness for seniors, to small group homes or individual homes.

“It is great for horticulture to align with music therapy, and we have been watching what happens with the interaction with our music and horticultural interns — they have so many ideas,” Bodin said.

All of Earthtones’ clients pay for services through their activities budget, she said, adding, that many clients with development disabilities on Medicaid “really thrive on the powerful activities through music therapy, and horticultural therapy is really growing.”

Bodin also noted that more group homes are building gardens outside the house, which provides another aspect of horticultural therapy.

Bodin said when she was younger she “passionately loved growing things,” but then went back to another love — art — when she began her career. She was the dean of the Oregon College of Art and Craft for a while, and then embarked on a new career path, earning a degree in gerontology.

She then took horticultural therapy classes, and put in 1,000 hours as an intern, before coming to Earthtones.

Therapy rooted in garden

Reid reiterated that she wanted more than a gardening program for her Rose Villa residents and it was important to have a program that was therapy based, so that is why she chose to partner with Earthtones.

All the interns at Earthtones receive extensive training about setting and reaching goals with a wide variety of people, Bodin said.

“We start any program with a written assessment, and the therapists all have benchmarks and goals, which makes this a much different program than just gardening,” she said.

The main, overarching goal of horticultural therapy is that sessions will contribute to improvement in the quality of residents’ lives through creating new avenues of self-expression, increased social engagement, and sensory stimulation, while at the same time giving them access to gardening and/or nature, Bodin said.

The benefits to horticultural therapy are many, Reid noted.

“There is cognitive and sensory stimuli and social activity. A lot of the residents are Oregon natives, and Sandra brings in the plants they’ve grown up with and had in their own yards, so they have those memories. And it is fun,” she said.

Reid hopes the horticultural therapy program will keep “evolving and growing” at Rose Villa, even as the surroundings change during major construction at the site.

As for the future, she added, “I’d like to have an interactive, sensory garden space” that appeals to all the five senses.

Learn more about Rose Villa at rosevilla.org.

For more information about Earthtones, visit earthtonesmusictherapy.com or call 503-284-6794.

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