

Special gardens can help children with autism

(reprinted with thanks from RUSTIK Magazine, April 2, 2014)

Florence Strang, a mother of three and registered psychologist in Newfoundland, uses horticultural therapy in her counseling work. Gardening played a role in her own recovery from cancer, and also proved effective with her autistic son, Ben. On World Autism Awareness Day, Strang discusses the value of horticultural therapy for children with autism.

For years, horticultural therapy has been used in rehabilitation centers, hospitals and nursing homes as a means of improving quality of life. Facilitated by a trained therapist, engaging a person in gardening and plant-based activities helps achieve specific therapeutic treatment goals and, the fact that it can be easily adapted to schools and home settings makes it a valuable therapeutic approach.

More recently, horticultural therapy has been found to be particularly effective for people with special needs, such as children with autism. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects over two million people in the United States and tens of millions worldwide. [At present, there is no federal government monitoring system in place to provide accurate statistics on the prevalence of ASD in Canada, even though it is known that ASD is the most common form of any neurological disorder or severe developmental disability of childhood. –Ed.]

Autism primarily impairs communication and socialization skills, though many people with autism also have sensory issues, in which some (or all) of their five senses are over- or under-sensitive to external stimuli. Then, when their senses are bombarded, it can create extreme anxiety and result in a so-called ‘melt down.’ In addition, many people with autism, particularly children, struggle with fine motor tasks, such as using scissors or zipping a jacket. A well-planned horticultural therapy program can address each of these areas.

The following is a summary of how horticultural therapy can help improve the lives of those with autism:

Communication skills: People on the autism spectrum, even those who are ‘high functioning’, struggle with the use of language in some way, and some are

completely non-verbal. Gardening provides an ideal activity for those with autism because it is a hands-on skill and does not require much language. It is very easy to incorporate visual cues and directions for those who have limited verbal skills. For example, photos can be used to demonstrate how to plant and care for seeds.

Social skills: People with autism generally struggle with forming social relationships. Being a part of a gardening club or group allows them the opportunity to work together towards a common goal. Planting seeds, watering plants, weeding and harvesting food side by side allows them to experience the synergy that comes from being part of a group, without the demands of conversation or other social etiquette.

Sensory issues: Many of the ‘unusual behaviours’ common to people with autism are because of sensory issues. Each of the five senses may be affected – either because they are over- or under-sensitive. For example, autistic people may cover their ears when they hear loud noises because their hearing is so sensitive that loud noises cause physical pain. Some people with autism engage in head banging and other self-harming behaviours. In many cases, this serves the purpose of stimulating an under-active sense of touch. The garden presents a relaxing environment that, at the same time, can be both stimulating and soothing to the senses. A well planned sensory garden can incorporate colours, smells, textures, edible plants, and sound features such as running water or wind chimes, thereby engaging all of the senses in a very relaxing way.

Motor skills: There is no doubt that gardening is a physical activity. Activities such as digging, weeding and watering can develop gross motor skills, while manipulating small seeds and transplanting young plants can enhance fine motor development.

In a school setting, many children with autism will not be able to excel at sports, drama, music or other extra-curricular activities. But when it comes to growing a sunflower, a child with autism can do as well as, or better than, any other kid in school. And that makes horticultural therapy an extremely valuable tool in the educator’s toolkit.

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