

Along the Garden Path



A therapeutic horticulture program guide
for people living with early and middle stages of
Alzheimer's and dementia and their caregivers

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Introduction

We invite you to use this program guide to engage individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia and their caregivers through shared guided experiences. You will learn about their needs, and how you can create a meaningful experience for them by focusing on their strengths and abilities. While there is some information about dementia in this guide, we encourage you to take advantage of the connect2culture training that assists cultural institutions make the transition from information to implementation. Keep in mind that the disease has impacted the lives of the people living with it as well as those around them, especially their caregivers.

In thinking about the goal of this program guide, we asked ourselves, "How can we help horticultural sites create engaging opportunities to give a sense of joy, pride and purpose?"

The key to creating a dynamic program is in using multi-sensory activities to actively involve your visitors. Your site is an ideal environment for just that. Botanic gardens and other types of horticultural sites are filled with opportunities for exploration and discovery. They can be sources of enjoyment, relaxation, and engagement through fragrance, sound, color, texture, and you might even consider taste! These sensory experiences offer guided access to the outdoors and can strengthen connections between participants, to the environment, and with memories.

For caregivers, this program is a break from the demands of giving care. It offers non-clinical surroundings where they can enjoy spending time with the person they care for. It is a chance for them to get their hands dirty while also giving them a constructive and fun way to meet other people in similar circumstances. This informal supportive environment also alleviates some of the depression and isolation caused by the stresses of caregiving.

For individuals living with dementia, this program offers the same social and emotional stimulation and support that a caregiver needs to improve their quality of life and keep them connected. The benefits of being outdoors, walking, breathing fresh air, and being around other people are vital to lifting their spirits. These benefits are unquantifiable and invaluable to improving their quality of life.

Your organization, whether a large botanical garden or a modest community site, can use this guide to be more inclusive of visitors with dementia and community members. The invitation to explore the gardens together will be appealing for caregivers who are looking for activities to enjoy with their family. Sending individuals with dementia home with a living plant to care for gives them a sense of purpose and pride, feelings which are gradually lost as the disease progresses.

Within these pages are program activities organized by season. **Activities** and **Conversation Prompts** are broken into two sections based on early and middle stage abilities. Keep in mind that people with dementia progress at different rates, so these are general guidelines. The foundations of dementia are based on CaringKind's definition of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) and three stages – early, middle, and late. More information on these distinctions can be found in CaringKind's online Family Caregiver Guide and resources.

We hope that you will use this tool to reach out to people who appreciate unique and enjoyable activities that connect them with their family and their community.



Program Overview & Goals

This resource provides a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to therapeutic horticulture programming for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. It seeks to provide a framework that program facilitators can use to create a meaningful and engaging experience for this audience.

Therapeutic horticulture, as defined by The American Horticultural Therapy Association, is the participation in horticultural activities facilitated by a registered horticultural therapist or other professionals with training in the use of horticulture as a therapeutic modality to support program goals. Therapeutic Horticulture is the process through which participants enhance their well-being through active or passive involvement in plant and plant-related activities.

Numerous studies done in recent years demonstrate the therapeutic benefits of nature and engaging in the natural environment for many populations. Research has demonstrated that engaging in and with nature can provide many health benefits including a decrease in blood pressure, reduced production of stress hormones, and fighting feelings of anxiety and depression.



This program supports participants by:

Cognitive

- Aiding in short and long term memory recall
- Supporting attention span and ability to focus
- Promoting recall of relevant vocabulary
- Stimulating curiosity

Physical

- Providing opportunities for sensory stimulation
- Creating opportunities for multi-sensory experiences with the natural environment
- Integrating moderate exercise to support coordination, agility, stamina, balance and standing tolerance
- Stimulating appetite
- Supporting attentiveness through activities conducted in natural daylight

Emotional

- Encouraging and validating feelings of success in participant accomplishments
- Enhancing self-confidence and positive self-esteem
- Providing the opportunity for the participant to nurture
- Allowing for self-expression and creativity in a non-judgmental environment
- Cultivating positive emotions to help fight feelings of isolation and frustration

Social

- Promoting interaction around a common interest
- Engaging in an ability-appropriate activity
- Using horticulture as a common language
- Encouraging socialization and connection

Using This Guide



For easy reference, this guide is organized by season, each incorporating a guided walk culminating in an ability-appropriate enjoyable activity. Please note, for the purpose of this program guide, the word “partners” refers to the participant/caregiver dyad.

Guided Walk

This section is a seasonal orientation to botanical points of interest in a garden setting. Guided walks through the garden are a source of sensory stimulation and serve as a springboard for conversation. As you make your way through the garden, you might pause briefly to make observations about the seasonal changes, drawing attention to flowers and plants that will be the focus of your activity. You might also notice the sounds and smells of nature. This component can also be adapted for an indoor setting or conservatory.

Before beginning your guided walk, take a moment to introduce yourself and other staff and volunteers to your participants. Let them know briefly about the program

plan. We suggest that everyone wear name tags, including the participants so that you can address each other by name. Setting a warm and welcoming tone from the very beginning will establish a rapport and comfort level that will encourage everyone to participate and enjoy themselves.

Making eye contact and repeating their responses are ways to help your participants maintain focus or refocus them from distractions. Since environmental noise or activity may be encountered, consider using T-coil compatible assistive listening devices (ALDs) that amplify your voice, help muffle ambient sounds, and keep your participants focused. It is strongly recommended that the facilitator preview the garden walk just prior to the group's arrival to ensure that points of interest are available and the path is unobstructed and accessible.

The **Tool Bag**, a collection of samples, materials and tactile and visual resources to have on hand will help to enhance the sensory impact of the garden walk. **Points of Interest** and **Discussion Prompts** assist in easing participants into their experience.

A list of **Relevant Terms and Concepts** provides information and definitions regarding the horticultural material and processes involved in each season's activities. An awareness of these terms and concepts is helpful to participants in this program.

Activities

The seasonally appropriate activities are divided into four sections. Within each section, the facilitator will find a list of **Recommended Activity Supplies** to prepare before the program begins. Note that there may be items that require more than a few days to prepare. Key points to ensure a successful program are included in **Tips for the Facilitator**. **Conversation Prompts** are suggested for participants with early and middle stage dementia. *Facilitator instructions are italicized.*

The **Activity Procedure** section provide a process and framework for the hands-on component. They are the same for both individuals in the early and middle stages of dementia, with some adjustments to program pace, word choice, discussion prompts, and other supports. For instance, an individual with middle stage dementia may need more verbal and visual prompts, time to process the information, and more encouragement than someone less progressed. Patience, measured program pace,

simplified instructions, positive validation, and addressing people by name will build a sense of trust and comfort level as well as keep them in the moment with you.

While the **Activity Procedure** section is a step-by-step guide, please note that just as in nature, many times there is an unexpected ebb and flow to the program pace. Heed the organic nature of the participant group and be flexible with the procedures and discussion to meet the participants' needs *in the moment*.

The friendly tone of the writing in this guide is meant to give you an idea of how you might use your demeanor and word choice to establish rapport with your program participants. Setting the tone of the program by being open, warm, and patient will set you on the right path to creating an enjoyable experience for everyone!

