



ELDERGROW

digging in THE BENEFITS OF GARDENING FOR SENIORS

story by LIESEL SCHMIDT | photography courtesy of WOODBINE REHABILITATION & HEALTHCARE CENTER

Nature is a sensory experience. There is something tactile and sensorial about digging in the dirt, feeling the coolness of the soil in your hands and the richness of earth between your fingers; watching plants grow from seeds; and smelling the fragrance of blooming flowers or the fresh scent of greenery. Being connected to nature—whether through active interaction or passive exposure—has shown to have a direct correlation to healing. In whatever form it may come, contact with nature can promote the benefits of medical treatment and therapy, providing positive mental and physiological effects.

Building on this concept of therapeutic interaction with nature, Orla Concannon founded Eldergrow in 2015 with the mission of bringing the outdoors in through mobile, indoor gardens. “These gardens foster a sense of renewed purpose and hope,” explains Sarah Dirckx, marketing manager for Eldergrow. “There are innumerable evidence-based studies proving the therapeutic benefits of nature—particularly to seniors. A study published by the University of Washington inspired Orla to create Eldergrow, showing that daily gardening reduced risk factors for dementia by as much as 36 percent. That same study found that therapeutic horticulture elevates mood, improves sleep, decreases agitation and improves motor skills.

“We provide two innovative, therapeutic horticulture programs,” Dirckx continues. “The original full-service therapeutic horticulture program is designed for memory and skilled care settings and comes with in-person Eldergrow educators, while the DIY culinary herb garden program is designed for assisted and independent living and is maintained by communities with resources and herb plants sent from Eldergrow on [a] monthly basis. We’re now nationwide in over almost 500 communities and continue to provide more and more residents with meaningful connections to nature.”

Recently, Woodbine Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center in Alexandria partnered with Eldergrow to provide residents with these unique gardening programs, believing in the therapeutic benefits they provide. “We felt that this was an innovative way to bring ‘the outside in’ to our residents and allow them to participate in an activity that they used to enjoy prior to coming to stay at Woodbine,” says Donna Shaw RN, LNHA, administrator at Woodbine Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center. “We hope to engage the sensory stimulation of our residents and provide them with the feeling of accomplishment that comes from gardening.”

More than just the sensorial experience, is the feeling of purpose. “The garden is a living thing,” Shaw goes on. “The residents love the feeling of being needed, just like anyone does. They care for the garden and watch it thrive. It produces flowers and herbs that they can use, but it also provides [various] types of stimulation that [enhance] their moods and [activate] all five senses. They smell the earth, the flowers and herbs; they touch and feel the various textures of the dirt and plants. When they [use] herbs for garnish or ingredients in a salad, they are experiencing taste. The wind chimes that move from the fan on the garden is a sound they hear that is relaxing to them.”

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The benefits of gardening, in fact, have proven numerous. Patients with chronic musculoskeletal pain who took part in a month-long horticultural therapy program saw improvements in mental and physical health as well as their ability to cope with their pain. The severity of clinical depression is also shown to decrease with routine therapeutic gardening activities. Gardening may help reduce the onset of dementia. For patients with dementia, having ready access



to gardens lessens the likelihood of aggressive behavior or injuries and has been proven to improve sleep and hormone balance in addition to reducing agitation.

Eldergrow's innovative Therapeutic Horticulture program includes an indoor, mobile garden filled with organic soil and nontoxic plants specifically chosen to provide sensory stimulation and opportunities for residents to reminisce. An Eldergrow educator also teaches interactive classes and provides garden maintenance twice a month, during which time they build relationships with the residents at Woodbine and track various facets of their emotional health and wellness including spatial awareness, socialization, motor skills, sensory stimulation, creative expression and cognitive stimulation. "We also provide daily activities through our online portal so staff and residents have ways to connect with the garden and nature every day of the month," says Dirckx. "With each class, we measure and monitor the wellness goals of each individual resident at Woodbine. In the first quarter of 2023, we saw that 100 percent of Woodbine residents met their wellness goals."

Says Shaw of the effects she has seen at Woodbine, "It has made a noticeable difference. Our residents started by filling the garden with dirt and planting the plants themselves. Some of them take initiative to help water the garden and care for it daily with our staff members. They love having a responsibility in a meaningful way. The Eldergrow staff members come to Woodbine every two weeks and host a structured activity [in which] the residents participate and utilize the garden. The garden helps our residents feel excited and look forward to what the garden will produce! Our residents love interacting with the 'real garden' that is indoors and enjoy seeing all of their hard work pay off."



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