

Horticultural Therapy & WNF&GA

A Brief History

The recognition of horticultural therapy as an accepted treatment and profession is relatively new. The first Master of Science degree in the subject was awarded in 1955 by Michigan State University, and in 1971 Kansas State University developed a curriculum combining horticulture and psychology. Although the medicinal uses of plants reaches back centuries, it was not until the 1800s that some noted the benefit of agricultural work for mental patients. Recognition of gardening as an activity for physical and mental rehabilitation occurred in the early 1900s.

In September 1925, an article on horticultural therapy appeared in the Woman's National Farm & Garden Association magazine, reporting on the work of Miss Elizabeth Hall in what was termed "one of the newer finds – the adaptation of horticulture to modern therapeutics."

The article continued:

"For some reason that scientists have never been able to account for women are, as the world knows, better able to care for growing things than men. Fruits, trees and flowers as well as children and all other growing things thrive best under the delicate care of a woman. Can it not therefore be taken for fact that, by her sympathy, understanding and interest, woman is best suited to arouse the interest in things of the mentally ailing or the nervously ill and thereby restore them to normalcy."

An experiment along this line was undertaken in the Occupational Therapy Department of the Pennsylvania Hospital for Nervous and Mental Diseases by Dr. Bond in the fall of 1924. The woman he put in charge was Elizabeth Hall. Miss Hall's training admirably suited her for this piece of work. She was a graduate of Radcliffe College, and after receiving her degree was undecided whether to study medicine or turn to agriculture and the freedom of working in the open which she loved so well. She chose Horticulture and the two-year course at the School of Horticulture for Women at Ambler, Pennsylvania. It was her knowledge of practical horticulture combined with her interest in medicine that reassured Dr. Bond she was a suitable young woman – he was convinced it was what he wanted – so thus the experiment was commenced.

For her work at the hospital Miss Hall was given use of a piece of ground of ten acres or more, three good-sized greenhouses and without exception, what one might call hundreds of cold frames. She was responsible for all the work done indoors and out, the proper rotation of crops and planting all the seedlings used in the large



kitchen as well as for the bedding plants for the grounds. Even more unusual was the fact that she, a woman, had entire charge of the actual stoking of the fire which kept the greenhouses at their correct temperature all through the winter months – Sundays and weekdays all alike.

The first importance of her task was to interest the patients. Each is an individual and has to be studied most carefully to ascertain what kind of work satisfies her best. There appears to be two types of patients – those who feel humiliated with mechanical work, such as cultivating, repotting and cuttings, but want a big job with responsibility; and those that tremble at the thought of any responsibility but want the work all pre-digested. The aim of the therapist is eventually to see the second group rise to the level of the first.

Frequently a patient displays unusual skill in arranging flowers with delightful color combinations. When a patient is seen to crave this kind of work, Miss Hall calls upon her when there is an order for flowers. At holiday seasons there is a great opportunity for the creative work. At Thanksgiving, a vivid mass of chrysanthemums; for Christmas, poinsettias and Jerusalem cherries in profusion are examples. While at all times of the year the reception rooms and halls are filled with palms and ferns which are constantly in need of renewal on account of the heat and dry atmosphere.

As almost everybody knows, flowers have a universal appeal. The faithful old red geranium has drawn more than one patient to the greenhouse by its cheery color. When once there, the patient's interest is awakened and the healthful work is offered. The work is not confining as the patients can walk around and work too; it is not monotonous and always there is stirred that innate interest in the tiny seed coming from a crack in the soil, emerging into something green and eventually evolving into something which can be taken away, can be inhaled, can be shared with others less fortunate than those who have been able to assist in its growth."

Another article, published in *The Saturday Evening Post* of October 27, 1927 was devoted to a discussion of horticulture for women, citing the increasing number of job opportunities in the field. "A new and highly important branch of the field is horticultural therapy," wrote the author, "work done by trained horticulturists in connection with the departments of occupational therapy in hospitals specializing in mental and nervous diseases." While the article covers various aspects of horticulture – from garden design, plant pathology, supervising school gardens, raising flowers for decorating purposes, and the like – it was among the first published reports of the WNF&GA's work in horticultural therapy.



In the 1950s, Alice Wessels Burlingame significantly advanced the field of horticultural therapy. A native of Detroit, Mrs. Burlingame graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in psychiatric social work. She later studied horticulture and landscape architecture at Michigan State University, returning to University Hospital in Ann Arbor for further training in occupational therapy. In 1952 she formed a small workshop for those

interested in using plant material to make others well. From this grew a nine-year study for the deaf, blind and geriatrics to determine their needs.

The findings resulted in Mrs. Burlingame's publication, *Therapy Through Horticulture*. Her second book, *Hoe for Health*, contains research of her 25 years in horticultural therapy. She also wrote columns for gardeners, presented programs for inmates, taught courses at MSU and held positions in professional organizations. A member of the Birmingham (MI) Branch for more than 30 years, Mrs. Burlingame received the WNF&GA's Citation of Recognition in 1975. In 1984, WNF&GA established the Alice Wessels Burlingame Scholarship in Horticultural Therapy to encourage the study and employment of women in the field.