

We Share and We Grow Together: Application of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture By Occupational Therapy Students

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1. Service users, families of service users and volunteers gathering to start the gardening activity in the Sharing Garden.

2. Third-year Occupational Therapy students, Manprit and Korrine, assisting a service user in a leaf-stamping activity.

The Diploma in Occupational Therapy (Dip in OT), a three-year programme offered in Nanyang Polytechnic, Singapore has had elements of gardening and its applications in occupational therapy embedded in its curriculum for almost two decades now. In this course, students learn about the basics of gardening in the class room, as well as in the Occupational Therapy Garden (OT garden), a teaching laboratory that is housed in fifth level of the School of Health Sciences. Here, students learn that gardening can be a means of therapy or an outcome of successful therapy for clients of various age groups and with various diagnoses.

The hands-on laboratory sessions aim to equip students with basic knowledge and skills in social and therapeutic horticulture (STH). STH has been defined as the use of gardening activities to promote health and well-being of individuals.¹ The teaching sessions are anchored by staff in the diploma programme. In 2015, the students have had the privilege of having guest speakers from NParks or gardeners from the “Community in Bloom” community to explain gardening to them as well. As a result of their exposure to STH in the course, some current students and graduates from the Dip in OT have initiated and set up gardening programmes, either whilst they were on clinical placements or in their actual work settings, which included community hospitals, daycare centres for the elderly and nursing homes.

In healthcare institutions like the Institute of Mental Health and Khoo Teck Phuat Hospital, occupational therapists use gardening to help patients with physical or psychosocial health issues. The multi-sensory experience offered through gardening have helped patients during rehabilitation, especially via tailored programmes. Adjustments to gardening equipment have been made to suit wheelchair users and other users with specific needs. For some patients with mental health issues, the seed for vocational aspiration was also sowed through therapeutic gardening activities.

Besides enabling them to tackle the mood disorders or the psychosis that they are facing, patients can pick up vocational skills that may help them to get a job as a gardener in future, as explained by senior occupational therapist, Ms Koh Hwan Jing.²

The positive impact that gardening can bring to different client groups has been discussed widely in literature. They include: increased social inclusion, social interaction, increased physical activities, increase in skills, uplifting of self-esteem and improved cognitive abilities.^{3,4,5} Social inclusion, has been described by Sempik⁶, using the model proposed by Burchardt et. al., as encompassing the four key facades of production, consumption, social interaction and political engagement. STH, according to Sempik⁶ can encourage the involvement in these four facades of activities by the individual, thus promoting social inclusion.

On 24 June 2016, a group of 20 occupational therapy (OT) second- and third-year students took to learning more about social and therapeutic gardening as they helped out at the Sharing Garden Tea Party. The Sharing Garden is located within the grounds of the Salvation Army’s family hub on Tanglin Road. Sharing Garden is a pilot project under the umbrella of Brand For Humanity Pte Ltd, a Singapore-registered social enterprise that specialises in addressing social and environmental issues through social innovation. Assisted by the Autism Bridge Strategy Group, Ms Rovena Plique, founder of Brand For Humanity Pte Ltd, hopes to encourage social inclusion for people with autism and similar disorders, together with their families and caregivers, in this haven of greenery. The space has been crafted out to give people with autism and their families an opportunity to mingle and socialise with volunteers which include youths and volunteer gardeners. Launched in September 2015, the garden has organised regular weekly gardening sessions as well as special gatherings such as the above mentioned “Sharing Garden Tea Party” to promote social and therapeutic horticulture in our urban landscape.



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References

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³ Fieldhouse J, Sempik J (2007) 'Gardening without borders': reflections on the results of a survey of practitioners of an 'unstructured' profession. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(10), 449-453.

⁴ NParks (2016) NParks launches Singapore's first therapeutic garden in a public park to provide respite and improve mental well-being. (2016). Retrieved 15 July, 2016, from <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/news/2016/5/launch-of-therapeutic-garden-at-hortpark>

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⁶ Wang, D., & MacMillan, T. (2013) The Benefits of Gardening for Older Adults: A Systematic Review of the Literature, *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 37(2), 153-181. doi: 10.1080/01924788.2013.784942

⁷ Wee, L. (2012, August 9). Sowing the seeds of health. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from http://www.c3a.org.sg/Learning_context.do?id=462

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On the day itself, the third-year OT students acted as facilitators, and together with other volunteers who are allied health professionals, helped to bridge the gap between understanding about autism and working with people with autism through gardening. The briefing helped the second-year OT students and other youth volunteers from a local junior college to understand how to communicate and interact better with the service users of the Sharing Garden. The awareness of using horticulture as a viable means to encourage social inclusion and interaction was briefly highlighted in the briefing.

During the briefing, the OT students and other volunteers were divided into five groups to work with the service users of Sharing Garden. Generally, two volunteers worked with a service user that day to attempt the tasks of potting, cutting, weeding and watering within the span of about an hour. Apart from gardening, another gardening-related activity, leaf stamping (using leaves and paint) was also conducted to promote interactions between service users and volunteers. They were blessed with good weather; it had been raining throughout the day, but the sun was out when the gardening activities began. The muddy puddles and wet grounds, formed from the rain earlier, did not deter the service users from participating in the activities at all.

On how the session has increased the awareness of STH amongst the Dip in OT students who participated that day, feedback was gathered from them in a debrief session.

"It was a good opportunity to see the potential of how regular gardening activities can be applied to promote social inclusion, health and well-being for people with autism, or other client groups. What this session made me realise is that what we learn in theory in harnessing the potential of STH for all the benefits that we have read about, needs a lot of meticulous planning and organisation. A thorough understanding and good appreciation of gardening activities itself and the client group characteristics is essential to the success of STH.

"It'll be nice to be involved more in STH-related activities so that we can understand its role better, and how we can use it to help our clients in future. Gardening, after all, can be a meaningful occupation (an activity that occupies one's time) for people whom we'll come to help in future," read one of the comments shared by the third-year students.

Nature and gardening can offer opportunities to heal and promote rehabilitation. Concerted efforts and better understanding of how to harness the power of STH to apply it effectively for different groups of people in a local context can pave way for more effective programmes to encourage health, social and well-being amongst us, in our garden city. With the advent of the new Therapeutic Garden @ HortPark recently and its related research activities, together with a vision of expanding the sites for Therapeutic Garden⁷ the idea of letting people who need STH to access it easily, can be materialised soon. 

Budding bed for occupational therapists – the occupational therapy education in Singapore

Currently, there are about 967 registered occupational therapists (OTs) in Singapore (Allied Health Professions Council 2015), and most of them have graduated from Nanyang Polytechnic's three-year Diploma programme. Since its inception in 1992, the programme has remained the only local education programme for occupational therapists. However, the educational landscape of occupational therapists will soon evolve to include a four-year degree programme, offered by The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) in September 2016. Even after the diploma programme will be ceased in 2018, NYP's programme will continue to be recognised for its contribution to build the occupational therapy practice landscape in Singapore (www.saot.org.sg).

NYP's alumni, together with the OTs from other training programmes around the globe, have contributed to the rehabilitation and prevention programmes in various institutions such as hospitals, rehabilitation centres, nursing homes and community agencies.

Occupational therapy is a registrable health profession that works with people of all ages to participate in occupations (activities) of their choice. These occupations can include, but are not restricted to, self-care, leisure (such as gardening), school and work (www.saot.org.sg).

Occupational therapists work with people with various conditions, such as physical disabilities or mental health, issues. These issues may be congenital or acquired through accidents or diseases, or a by-product of the ageing process. When life goals and participation in meaningful activities are affected, occupational therapists will collaborate with the individual to acquire the necessary life skills, or through environmental modifications, allow them to carry out their roles in life again (www.saot.org.sg).

References

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