

Master Gardeners Give Growing Support To Plant Therapy

NEWARK, Del. — With the enthusiastic assistance of extension master gardener volunteers, the frail elderly clients of the University of Delaware Adult Day Care Center are filling the center's new courtyard with plantings of peppers and tomatoes, marigolds and cone flowers.

Horticulture therapy reverses the usual dependent role of older people, explains Melissa Schneck, staff assistant at the center who proposed the courtyard construction to the master gardeners last summer. "The theory is that by taking care of the plants, which are dependent on them, our clients can regain a sense of responsibility and purpose.

"Gardening is a really useful activity that pushes these older adults to use their eyes and their dexterity," says master gardener Tom Swoboda, who helped design the courtyard and select the plantings. "To start a pepper seed in a paper cup, transplant it outside, see

the plant grow and ultimately be able to pick and eat the pepper is a pleasant — not artificial —

activity."

Established in 1984, the Adult Day Care Center is funded by the

state Division of Aging and the City of Newark. Housing was first provided at the Hudson State Service Center, but in October 1986 the day care center moved to the university's Newark Hall.

Aware of the possibilities of a courtyard at the new location, Schneck contacted extension horticulturist Sue Barton, who referred her to Delaware's cadre of master gardeners. Master gardeners are volunteers who receive 45 hours of training from Delaware cooperative extension experts. In return they spend an equivalent amount of time helping spread extension home gardening information to larger audiences.

Schneck, 34, is a full-time staff member of the center and a part-time undergraduate student in individual and family studies at the university. She says the horticulture therapy idea was originally proposed by her in an independent study project with Dr. Marvin Sussman, the university professor

who initiated the adult day care program.

"You know, gardening is America's number one pastime," Schneck says. "Plus, it's a year-round activity. You can start seeds in the winter, put the plants out in the spring, harvest in the summer, and collect seeds in the fall."

When Schneck approached the master gardeners, the group immediately agreed to design the courtyard garden. Tom Swoboda, who was in the first group of extension master gardeners graduated in 1986, selected and placed the plants.

"I had been gardening since I was a boy. And when I read about the master gardener program two years ago, I decided that it suited me to a T," says Swoboda, a retired Du Pont physical chemist. "First, I was able to add more academic information on pests and diseases to my practical experience. And second, I had been rummaging around for something to do that wasn't all just for me. This program gave me a chance to do something for other people."

Swoboda said after the design was completed, he was surprised at how quickly it was implemented. "Literally within weeks we had men in there pouring concrete."

The master gardeners' courtyard design includes two raised beds accessible to clients in wheelchairs and three ground level beds. Concrete, non-slip walks wide enough for wheelchairs, two benches and an outdoor faucet make up the major physical renovations that were completed last November. Money for the courtyard construction came from the university's renovation fund for Newark Hall, the former site of Newark's Central Junior High School.

During the cold months of February and March, the 37 adult day care clients were able to start vegetable and flower seedlings in the wide, sunny windows of the center. Master gardeners Dot Coleman, Tom Swoboda and Sylvia Finnican assisted the clients in these plantings.

"Everyone really enjoyed planting the seeds. Most of our people gardened when they were younger, and this is a return to a former role," says Schneck.

Schneck points out that planting, thinning, potting and transplanting can contribute to physical improvements among the elderly because they involve good hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. Another benefit, she says, is a new sense of self-confidence experienced by these older gardeners when their plants prosper.

The enthusiasm of the gardeners produced an overabundance of seedlings. Some of the extras were used for a plant sale. Others became part of a master gardener intensive gardening exhibit at the university's Ag Day.

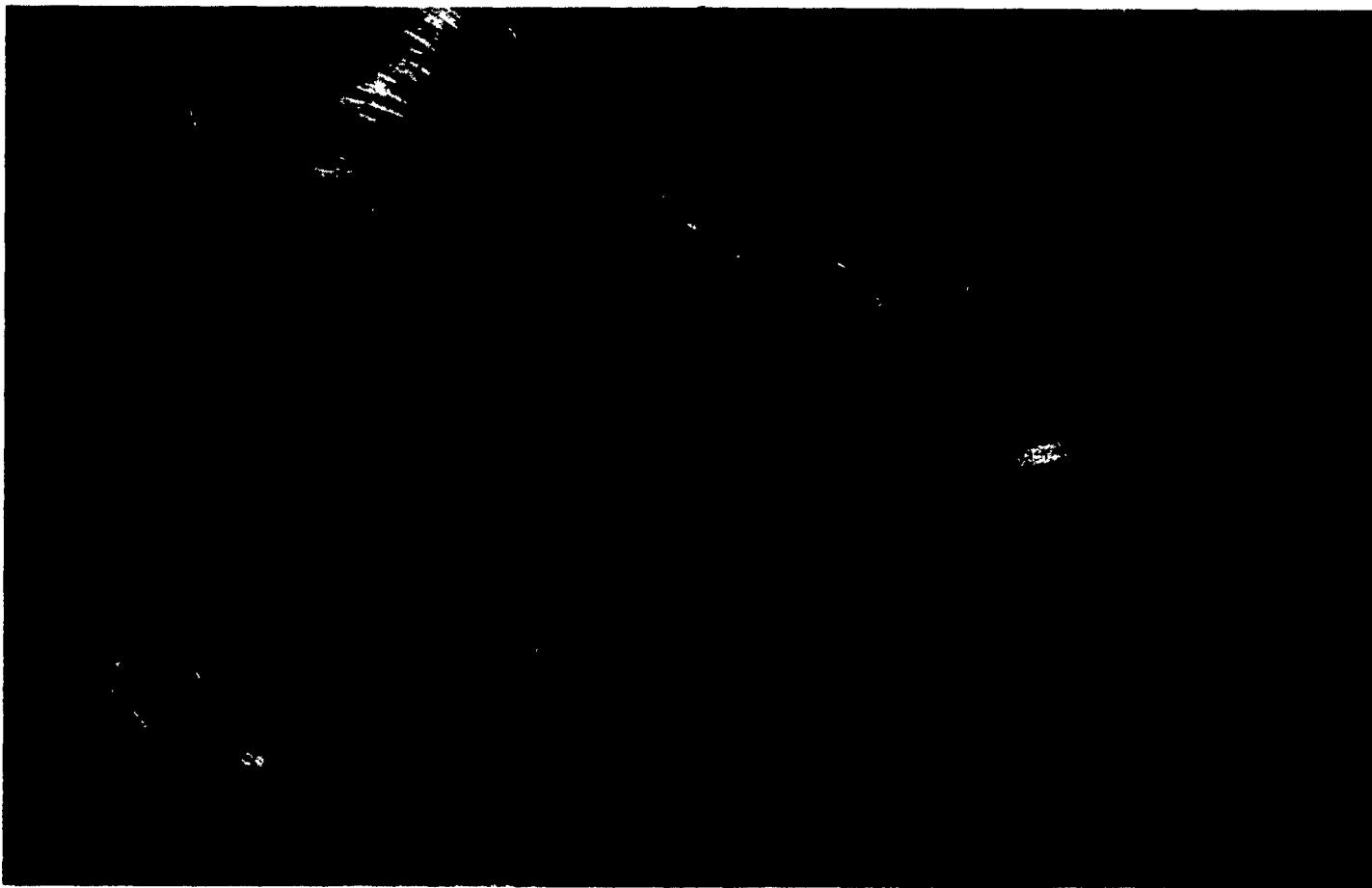
Landscaping the courtyard began in April. The plant material was bought from funds raised by an "Adopt A Plant" program initiated by center staff. Family members and former program participants were asked to contribute for a specific plant in exchange for a plaque with their name on it.

"We ended up with about \$1,200 in woody plants — shrubs like witch hazel, azalea, holly, swamp magnolia and blueberry — all of which had to be planted at once," says Swoboda. He rounded up enough master gardener volunteers to complete the landscaping

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Master gardener Tom Swoboda helps a participant of the University of Delaware Adult Day Care Center place vegetable seeds in cups of soil.



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