

# The Ayre Manor Garden Project

## 2009

From my perspective as a Care Aide at Ayre Manor Lodge, I would like to give you some insight into the importance of having a functioning garden in the Ayre Manor Courtyards ...

The courtyard gardens at Ayre Manor have the potential to contribute significantly to the quality of life of the residents, their friends and families. Since the bulbs in the courtyards have begun to bloom, the residents have been venturing out more often. This has filled a lot of their days with "gardening" ... watering, weeding and collecting rocks in the garden! This activity has given a noticeable amount of pleasure, even amongst patients unable to communicate verbally.

### BENEFITS OF HAVING A GARDEN IN THE AYRE MANOR COURTYARDS

The benefits of the gardens and the act of gardening have been documented for people of all ages and physical and mental abilities. The benefits are enormous:

- Having accessible gardens and the act of "gardening" represents an opportunity for exercise and social interaction, has a potential for nutritional benefits and increases feelings of well-being, both mentally and physically.
- Gardening has been proven to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and fight depression.
- When people lose so much of their former lives with dementia, finding something that they **can do and enjoy** means so much! Alzheimer's is a struggle with normal cognitive functions; gardening has no set structure that has to be followed. Therefore, it can help with the pressure and stress of not being able to function as residents once did, lifting the burden of dementia - if only for short periods of time during their day.
- Many garden objects - wind chimes, water features, old clotheslines, gazebos – evoke memories of happy times.
- Witnessing the yearly growing cycle can allow patients with cognitive impairment to relate to the environment and connect to times of the year without actually having to verbalize their understanding, again prompting memories associated with gardens of the past ... and present.
- The courtyard gardens encourage not only the residents but also their families to go outside in a safe environment and enjoy one another's company, free of the some of the stresses of cognitive impairment.
- The gardens can become part of the Activities Program at Ayre Manor – from planting seeds to following the growth cycle of the gardens. For people with difficulty communicating, the non-threatening, familiar nature of a garden needs no words.
- Gardening has the ability to stimulate the senses ... sight, smell, touch and even taste. A stroll in the garden can stimulate positive, soothing thoughts, therefore reducing agitation during characteristic "sun-downing" episodes and reducing residents' stress. Having birds, bugs and all the other elements of the out-of-doors around them, allows the residents to utilize all of their senses again with fewer risks involved.

### THE SENSORY GARDEN

There are so many different opportunities in a garden to stimulate the **senses**:

SIGHT: colours and shapes of plants and hard furnishings, variety in the height of the garden, special features (e.g. flowing water), birds and butterflies - all tend to evoke pleasant memories.

HEARING: birds, wind chimes, moving water, wind through the leaves of trees and shrubs, birds enjoying nectar-producing plants can make a garden into a "singing garden".

TOUCH: Touching and feeling different plants with various textures – large fleshy leaves, velvety, feathery ferns – not only stimulate the senses but also evoke good memories from plants in peoples' pasts, encouraging the sharing of stories. Because plants are sometimes tantalizing to touch, we do need to situate more delicate plants further back in the beds while the more durable ones can be placed within the reach of the residents.

TASTE: Picking fruit fresh from the plant – apples, peaches, plums, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries - and eating them ... who needs to explain how delightful that can be? Growing herbs and veggies, nut trees and fruit trees, - even having residents pick them - and using all products of the Courtyard Garden in the Ayre Manor kitchen can encourage residents to be more consciously involved in their food intake as well as offering the freshest, healthiest produce available.  
(TASTE also presents problems to the planning of the garden. We cannot include plants that sting or that are poisonous when ingested)

SMELL: Crushing fresh herbs in one's hands, walking under a flowering jasmine arch ... each can delight the senses. Utilizing subtle scents such as violets, locating scented plants at intervals so as not to overwhelm the senses, and planting herbs – especially those that release their scent only when rubbed - near pathways or outside sitting areas all add to the sensory experience of being outside without overwhelming the residents.

#### THE COURTYARD SETTING

The courtyard setting is ideal for the residents – especially those living in the restricted, "locked" wing of Ayre Manor. Gardens give a sense of freedom while still keeping our residents safely within its boundaries. Many residents at risk of "eloping" find the courtyard focus takes away from their feeling of restrictions on their movement and encourages them to focus on the growing garden.

IN CONCLUSION, being a care-giver here at Ayre Manor, I strongly believe that the quality of life of the residents (... and thus the staff) will be greatly improved by having a flourishing fruit, flower and veggie garden. It will be a natural, beautiful, safe environment – a fact that will soften the edges of living in a "facility". It will give back to so many of our residents their feeling of freedom of movement which their diseases and their ages have so cruelly taken away.

Thank you for your time and your encouragement in moving towards having these courtyard gardens grow and flourish!

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