Green-thumb therapy

Horticulture program benefits Paul Oliver patients, staff

BY MARK URBAN murban@record-eagle.com  Jun 16, 2019

FRANKFORT — The Green Team got plants into the ground for the first time last week under a cloudless blue sky.

Marcia Hansen, appointed to use her baking skills to turn an abundance of kale into toasted chips, was enjoying the sunshine and trying to find some patience as she admired the twin garden planters near the entrance to Paul Oliver Memorial Hospital in Frankfort. The first outdoor horticulture therapy session was meeting and the 87-year-old Hansen was already thinking about the harvest ahead.

"I think it's wonderful," Hansen said of the wooden planters that were getting kale, chives, peas, green beans, parsley and a couple of small tomato plants to its soil. "It's too bad it's not bigger.

"I want a tomato off the vine. The tomatoes here are anemic. Everything is better fresh."

Fresh vegetables aside, Paul Oliver's Green Team introduced horticulture therapy in January for a variety of reasons.

Kathy Pilon, occupational therapist at the hospital and the facilitator of the horticulture therapy program, said stress reduction and socialization are at the top of the list. And the benefits aren't limited to the long-term care residents.

"There's been studies that show you reduce stress by having natural things in your environment," Pilon said. "That's for patients and for staff."
For patients with memory issues like Alzheimer’s disease, performing physical tasks has shown to have benefits, according to organizations like the National Institute on Aging. Even smells can trigger pleasant emotions.

"It's something they've done for a long, long time," Pilon said. "It's a memory for them."

Hansen said she misses California because of its year-round flowers.

"During the war everyone had victory gardens," she said.

MediLodge of Traverse City has four raised beds in its courtyard for its long-term skilled nursing home and short-term rehabilitation patients. Life Enrichment Director Kasia Parcia said patients love getting Vitamin D the natural way.

"Just being able to get out in the sunshine, that's No. 1," she said. "They are drawn to the sunshine and just being able to do what they did before. But the greatest draw is the sunshine."

Parcia said the courtyard is enclosed, so there are no set usage times for patients who want to work in the planter beds, which contain flowers, tomatoes, banana peppers and cucumbers.

"They go whenever," she said. "They go with friends and they go with staff. They even have family members who weed with them. It's a whole courtyard clan."

Pilon took a training program on horticulture therapy a year ago at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Implementing it at Paul Oliver was a natural.

"I had to write a paper on a potential program," Pilon said. "I work here, I saw a need here ... and here we are."

The Green Team also involved the community in its program. The SEEDS Youth Conservation Program has gotten involved and the After School Program at Benzie Central constructed the planters. Several community volunteers as well as Paul Oliver staff are on hand to assist when the Green Team meets from 2-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

"We're trying to pull in community partners," Pilon said. "There's a lot of benefits."

The gardening program began inside in January with seedlings that were housed on a lighted cart. Those plants were added to soil for the first time at the first Thursday Green Team event in June.

"We wanted to start them inside so we're going year-round," Pilon said.

The outdoor planters are housed near the main entrance to Paul Oliver along a wall.

"This is kind of a social spot," Pilon said. "It's a bus stop, too. People can stop and have a natural experience rather than a cold, brick wall."

Dominating the planting on the first day outside were Bob and Betty Nilsson, who celebrated their 71st wedding anniversary on June 8.

"I love to garden and my wife loves it," said 93-year-old Bob Nilsson. "I like to really help with it and I know she does, too. I hope it survives."

Nilsson said he doesn't mind getting his hands dirty.

"No, not a bit," he said. "I know we have soap and water."