

## HORTICULTURAL THERAPY — HOW IT'S WORKING

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Agri-horticulture has been recognized for many centuries as an area with unlimited possibilities in the therapeutic and rehabilitation field. We, in North America, are just beginning to take advantage of these possibilities in the areas of the mentally and physically handicapped, senior citizens, and correctional institutions. The population in all of these areas is increasing rapidly, and we can no longer afford to support them in institutions, particularly if they are trainable and capable of being part of our work force and become self-sufficient. I am thinking particularly of the mentally and physically handicapped. The cost to keep a person in an institution at the present time is in excess of \$15,000 per year. Our governments, at all levels, from municipal to federal, are trying desperately to solve the many problems in the rehabilitation field. They need the help and co-operation of all citizens and businesses to help fill some of the gaps.

There are many jobs in the nursery business, parks, greenhouses, etc., that are excellent training grounds for some of these handicapped people. No one really knows their capabilities or potential until they have been given the opportunity. Believe it or not, but trained mentally retarded persons have fewer accidents when operating equipment, and the equipment will last longer with less repairs.

There are many support programmes available to you as a potential employer in order to assist handicapped people. These vary, depending on which programme best suits your needs, and which level of government is supporting it. I would suggest you contact all levels and ask for advice.

In Canada you can take one or more individuals for up to 2 months for an evaluation period with no commitments on your part. If the individuals work out, support programmes which pay half the wages for 1 full year's training are available. It could possibly take less time than a year. These individuals range in age from teenagers into the 50's, both male and female.

Last year a rehabilitation officer and I applied for and received a Local Initiative Programme Federal Government grant to provide training and opportunities for discharged psychiatric patients, many of whom had histories of unemployment for a number of years. I called upon my horticultural friends to assist, and the response was excellent. We supplied them with people to train along with their regular employees at no cost to them for a period not exceeding 6

months. The results were most gratifying. A total of 35 people were tried; some didn't last too long, but when the training period ended, 17 were employed and showed promise. Three of that group now hold permanent jobs and receive \$5.00 an hour plus, with very happy employers. The experience gained by the employers was gratifying, as they and their employees found out more about mental health and realized they also could assist in rehabilitation in a tangible way.

I have also been involved in teaching various horticultural subjects to instructors of the mentally retarded, and also of mentally retarded groups; advising them how they may become more horticulturally oriented in order to provide themselves with work opportunities in agricultural and horticultural areas. Lately programme directors for senior citizens are requesting instruction and advice as to how to institute horticultural programmes in senior citizens' complexes. This we are doing as part of our Outreach Programme at the Royal Botanical Gardens.

A year ago a committee was formed representing the mentally handicapped at government level, Ontario Nursery Trades Association, Flowers Canada, and Fruit and Vegetable Growers Associations, parks and recreation and farm groups. This committee provides liaison between the people who need help and the people who can assist in the agri-horticultural area. Further evidence of the interest in horticultural therapy was shown last year when over 200 persons from various fields of rehabilitation, hospitals, senior citizens' complexes, and institutions, attended a horticultural therapy symposium at the Royal Botanical Gardens. Many requests for horticultural input have been received as a result. Some of our correctional institutions are now assisting by manufacturing artificial light growing units which are available, at cost, to therapy programmes.

I urge you, as plant propagators, to assist wherever you can to use your talents as plantsmen, to help with the handicapped in your area. Since 1973 in the United States, the National Council for Therapy and Rehabilitation through Horticulture, Mount Vernon, 22121, has been promoting and encouraging the development of horticulture and related activities as a therapeutic and rehabilitation medium. The Council's activities and services include professional consultation, regional workshops and seminars, placement service and manpower exchange bank.

I have been involved in horticultural therapy and rehabilitation for over 10 years, and each year it becomes more exciting and challenging and I continue to realize how great is the need.