



# **Gardening for Life: A Guide for Activity Directors in Assisted Living, Nursing Homes, and Memory Care Facilities**

Presented by the Lifelong Gardening Committee  
Southeastern Wisconsin Master Gardener Program

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## **Introduction: Why Gardening Matters at Every Age**

Gardening is more than a hobby — it's a gateway to physical vitality, emotional wellness, and social connection. Whether someone is 8 or 88, gardening fosters purpose, sensory joy, and a connection to nature that is deeply grounding and healing.

For older adults, individuals with disabilities, and those living with memory loss, gardening can reignite joy, support physical and cognitive health, and create meaningful moments of interaction. For Activity Directors, incorporating gardening into programming is a powerful way to enrich the lives of residents — and it's easier than you think.

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## **Lifelong Benefits of Gardening**

### **1. Physical Health and Mobility**

- Gentle exercise for flexibility, balance, and strength
- Encourages use of fine and gross motor skills
- Can reduce risk of falls and promote better sleep

### **2. Cognitive Engagement**

- Stimulates memory and problem-solving skills
- Helps preserve attention span and mental clarity
- For dementia care, familiar smells and tasks can trigger positive memories

### **3. Emotional Wellness**

- Reduces stress, anxiety, and depression
- Offers a calming, meditative space
- Builds confidence and a sense of accomplishment

### **4. Social Connection**

- Fosters shared projects and teamwork
- Supports intergenerational bonding
- Encourages storytelling and reminiscing



# Sensory Gardening: A Therapeutic Experience

Sensory gardens are specifically designed to engage the five senses — sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound — providing rich therapeutic benefits for people of all abilities.



## Plants for Sight (Color and Visual Texture)

- Coneflower (Echinacea)
- Zinnias
- Daylilies
- Nasturtium
- Rainbow chard
- Ornamental kale



## Plants for Smell (Aromatherapy & Memory Triggers)

- Lavender
- Lemon balm
- Basil
- Mint (peppermint or spearmint)
- Rosemary
- Scented geranium



## Plants for Touch (Tactile Exploration)

- Lamb's Ear (Stachys byzantina) – soft and fuzzy
- Dusty Miller – velvety leaves
- Ornamental grass – swaying and textured
- Succulents – smooth and firm



## Plants for Taste (Edible Delights)

- Cherry tomatoes
- Strawberries
- Sugar snap peas
- Kale and lettuce
- Chives



## Plants & Features for Sound (Auditory Stimulation)

- Bamboo or ornamental grasses (rustle in the wind)
- Wind chimes
- Water fountains
- Bird feeders and houses



## Activity Ideas for Residents

Whether indoors or outdoors, there are countless ways to engage residents in gardening:



### Seasonal Planting Days

- Spring bulbs in containers
- Summer herb pots or pollinator flowers
- Fall mums and ornamental cabbage
- Winter indoor seed-starting



### Harvest & Savor

- Harvest herbs to use in cooking or tea
- Make lavender sachets or mint bouquets
- Create garden-to-table tasting parties



### Garden Crafts

- Paint flowerpots or garden markers
- Press and frame flowers
- Create fairy gardens or mini gardens



### Sensory Exploration Stations

- Set up a “touch and smell” table with herbs, soil, leaves
- Encourage storytelling through garden memories
- Match plants with memory cues (such as, “grandma’s lilac bush”)



## Intergenerational Opportunities

Gardening is a natural bridge between generations. Invite grandchildren, volunteers, or local youth groups to:

- Plant alongside residents
- Share stories while weeding or watering
- Build birdhouses or garden decorations together
- Document residents’ favorite plants and gardening memories for a keepsake book

These moments are rich with meaning — and often therapeutic for both young and old.

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## Easy Care Tips for Activity Directors

### Accessible Gardening Options:

- Raised beds and container gardens at standing or seated height
- Lightweight, ergonomic tools with soft handles
- Garden kneelers or benches with handles for stability

### Low-Maintenance Plants:

- Hosta
- Sedum
- Marigold
- Coreopsis
- Black-eyed Susan
- Peppers and tomatoes in pots
- Herbs, like thyme, oregano, or parsley (indoors or outdoors)

### Adapt Gardening to Indoors When Needed:

- Indoor grow lights and mini greenhouses
- Plant starts in recycled containers
- Windowsill herb gardens
- Aerogardens or tabletop hydroponics



## A Personal Invitation to Activity Directors

You play a vital role in enriching the lives of the people you serve. Gardening is a tool you can use to uplift spirits, promote health, and bring people together. Whether you have a patio or just a windowsill, there is a way to grow something beautiful — and meaningful — in your facility.

The **Southeastern Wisconsin Master Gardener Program's Lifelong Gardening Committee** is here to support you with training, resources, and expert guidance to help bring gardening to life in your facility.

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## About the Lifelong Gardening Program

The **Lifelong Gardening (LLG)** Program helps people garden **safely and successfully throughout life**, regardless of age or ability. Whether you're adapting tools, modifying tasks, or creating accessible gardens, LLG offers practical education to make gardening more inclusive and joyful.

### **LLG Program Objectives:**

- Understand tool and gardening basics
- Learn proper body mechanics for joint and back protection
- Discover tools and techniques for specific gardening tasks
- Promote energy conservation and accessible gardening practices



**Visit the Lifelong Gardening website for more information, resources, and upcoming training:**



<https://sewmg.org/lifelong-gardening>

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### **Contact the Lifelong Gardening Committee**

**Email:** [lifelonggardening@sewmg.org](mailto:lifelonggardening@sewmg.org)

**Website:** <https://www.sewmg.org>

See Activities, Lifelong Gardening: [Lifelong Gardening](#)

We'd love to help you explore how gardening can blossom in your community.  
Reach out today — and let's grow something wonderful together.

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**“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”**

**– Audrey Hepburn**

