

Gardening with Alzheimer's Residents

The surge in construction of dedicated Alzheimer's facilities has led to a lot of innovation in design. Facilities, activities and programs are being devised to fill the special needs of Alzheimer's residents. Particular attention is being paid to design features and activities which stimulate reminiscing and positive social interaction. Offering dementia residents visual and other sensory stimuli that evoke pleasant memories or can otherwise be connected to their past seems to make them more contented and less likely to behave in ways that are difficult to manage. Gardening, with its ability to stimulate many of the senses at once (sight, smell, touch and even taste) has been shown to be one of the most effective means to stimulate positive, soothing thoughts and appropriate social behavior.

The key impediment to involving Alzheimer's residents in gardening has been logistics. These residents require high levels of supervision and staff time, can be difficult to move to different activity areas (especially outdoors) and safety is always a major concern. Many of these residents have physical or health limitations, which mean that they cannot garden in the traditional way, even if staff manages to bring them to an outdoor garden. Many dementia facilities are facing this challenge – they know the benefits of getting their residents gardening again, but how to do it?

The answer can be simple. Make it feasible by having gardens indoors, close to where the residents live and spend their time. Create a safe environment that doesn't require full-time, intensive staff supervision, one where residents can choose the activity naturally – any time of day, all year-round. This will work equally well in rural or urban settings, even if there is no opportunity to garden in the conventional way or the weather severely limits the natural gardening season. A variety of activities can create meaningful interaction with the garden for residents at any level of dementia.

The ideal indoor gardening system should be complete and self-contained – this will make it easy to care for and minimize demands on staff. If you get a system that is mobile, it can be used in many locations around your facility, including in resident's rooms for those that may be confined to their beds. This mobility will greatly enhance your utilization of the garden system and thus your return on the investment.

An indoor garden should ideally be more than a collection of pots. Pots require frequent watering and repotting as plants outgrow their containers. Residents with limited dexterity or range of motion may find pots hard to handle. A good indoor gardening system should be large enough for several residents to garden at the same time (ideally facing each other on opposite sides) promoting interaction and socialization. The system should have growing medium that is deep enough for long-term plant growth including vegetables and root crops – at least 10" deep. A well-drained, porous growing mix combined with a good drain system will offset the effect of frequent over-watering.

Choose a system that has heavy-duty commercial grow lights, preferably HID (either metal halide or sodium). Though initially more expensive, these lights outperform fluorescent bulbs, use energy more efficiently and never require height adjustment. Your

garden will blossom and fruit with a vigor not attainable with “homeowner” style lights. A built-in light timer will be a great time saver by not requiring your staff to operate or adjust the lighting system. Some facilities report that residents gather around the garden, enjoying the bright lights that seem to have a positive impact on the depression which can accompany seasonal affective disorder.

Don't shy away from the well-documented imperative to get your Alzheimer's residents gardening, working in the soil, nurturing living plants and interacting with others in the process. Indoor gardening systems are an affordable long-term investment which will brighten the lives of residents and staff and impress visitors to your facility.