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Sunnyvale gardening program proves to be good therapy

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It started with a single fava bean plant.

The mission-defining horticultural therapy program at Sunnyvale's Idylwood Care Center grew from one resident's request for fava beans for dinner. Since then, through gardening and food, the senior nursing home has found a new form of therapy for its residents that has changed the focus and attitude of the entire facility.

Three years ago, Josephine Catona asked for her favorite bean to be featured in dinners, and the staff responded by planting fava bean sprouts outside her window. The plant soon grew to nearly 4 feet tall, and the staff had to ask Catona how to care for it. She not only cared for it, she also started teaching cooking classes to other residents — and in the process, she was transformed from an introverted resident with little interest in getting up every morning to one of the most social members of the community.

"I thought, if a small garden with just a bean plant can do that for an individual, what can a full garden do for all the residents?" said Franco Diamond, Idylwood administrator. "We hired a horticultural therapist and planned out an entire garden."

Today, the 170-bed care center is growing everything from tomatoes and cabbage to eggplant, and the residents are enjoying the health benefits of eating fresh, local vegetables daily. Diamond has given the nickname "Victory Garden" to the space inspired by Catona, who died last year.

The program has energized

residents and improved staff morale. The weight gain associated with moving into a nursing home stopped — residents were getting out in the garden, walking to their cooking classes and socializing more.

"We're seeing a higher quality of life, including lowered blood sugar, better diabetes control and bowel regularity," said Sandy Narasimhan, a dietitian at Idylwood. "It's a full garden-to-table project. We started small, but we've grown a lot, and it's all about sustaining this momentum."

Gardening and kitchen skills do double duty as rehabilitation therapy, Diamond said. Instead of residents going through range-of-motion activities in a gym, he said, they can reap the same physical benefits from watering plants, harvesting vegetables and shelling beans.

"The simple activity of stirring the batter for cupcakes assists an individual regaining their physical skills" — plus it's a familiar act that they enjoy, he said.

"We have to find ways to motivate the residents, to get them interested in life again, and cooking gives them something to look forward to," said Rashmi Rajadhyax, an occupational therapist at Idylwood. "It's easy to motivate people with the things they've

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done in the past. Everyone has gardened, and everyone wants to cook."

Residents confirm that sentiment.

"My father had a garden when I was growing up, and this garden brings back a lot of good memories," said one woman who has lived at Idylwood for five years. "The gardening makes me feel helpful and needed."

The Horticultural Therapy Program includes a series of large gardens on the Idylwood campus on Fremont Avenue and daily cooking classes.

The soup-of-the-day class rotates "head chef" status among residents on a weekly basis. Each chef gets to choose what recipes will be prepared and what sides will be served. Recently, Lucy Moreno, an Idylwood resident for three years, upped the ante: Besides one of her popular Mexican soups, Moreno made homemade salsa, guacamole and fresh tortilla chips. She said the staff may have eaten more of the meal than the residents.

Idylwood's sister facility in Fremont, Crestwood Manor, also features a gardening program and horticultural therapy, but the Idylwood staff hasn't heard of any other similar programs in the Bay Area. Diamond and his staff are hoping their program can be an example for facilities in the area. The program recently received wider attention after being featured in the book, "Nourish the Body and Soul," by Action Pact, a company of consultants and educators that helps nursing homes become more resident-directed.

The Idylwood residents have also expanded into the farmers market. Staffers and residents who are physically able to help out bring a load of their harvested vegetables to the Veterans Affairs Hospital

in Palo Alto every Wednesday to sell to the public. Next, Diamond said, are plans to start an on-site farmers market where people from the surrounding community can come buy fruits, vegetables and prepared foods, and see the work their neighborhood nursing home is doing.

"It shows people are grateful for what we are doing," Moreno said. "It's a daily exercise, and it gives us something really interesting to look forward to."

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THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR

Farmstand: Idylwood residents sell their veggies to the public 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Wednesdays at the Veterans Hospital farmers market, 3801 Miranda Ave., Palo Alto.

Recipes: Try Josephine Catona's fava bean recipe or Lucy Moreno's salsa recipe, Page 5.

More info: For details about Idylwood's horticultural therapy program, contact community relations coordinator Tanya Ahern at 408-739-2383.

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