

GARDENING WITH MEMORY LOSS

An Occupational Therapy Program for Dementia Friendly Gardening
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As part of the Occupational Therapy Doctorate program at the University of Montana, students complete fieldwork placements that allow them to work with a variety of populations in clinical and community settings. This summer, our OTD students had the pleasure of working with individuals experiencing memory loss through the inaugural Dementia Friendly Gardening program at Rocky Mountain Gardens.



RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT GARDENING CAN OFFER MANY BENEFITS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH MEMORY LOSS.

This includes reduced agitation and depression, improved sleep, fewer falls, and decreased reliance on mood-altering medications. Because people with dementia may also experience social isolation, group programs provide valuable opportunities for connection, engagement, and a sense of belonging.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS SUPPORT AGING ADULTS IN MANY WAYS.

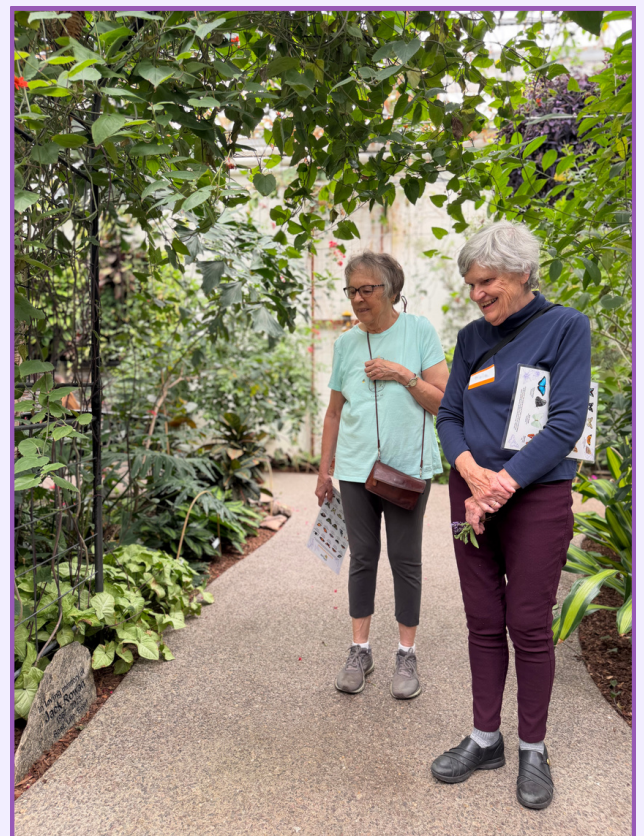
We help stroke survivors regain the skills needed to move safely, dress, bathe, cook, and participate in meaningful leisure activities. We assist people navigating cancer and other serious illnesses in maintaining strength, independence, and purpose. We also work with individuals living with neurodegenerative conditions, such as Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease, to preserve functional independence and quality of life.

Missoula occupational therapist Rebecca Marcinko originally developed the Dementia Friendly Gardening program as her doctoral capstone project during her own occupational therapy education. With support from a University of Montana Experiential Learning and Career Success Fund, we were able to bring the program to life for Missoula community members living with dementia.

Rocky Mountain Gardens generously provided meeting and garden space, supplies, and valuable gardening guidance. Additional MCDEE staff including Marirose Kuhlman, who led a pollinator walk, and Kelly Moore, who facilitated a cooking activity. Rob Taylor, the lead horticulturist at the Missoula Butterfly House and Insectarium, gave us a guided tour of that facility as well.

Throughout the program, our OTD students learned how to adapt and grade activities for people with a range of cognitive abilities while enjoying the beauty of Rocky Mountain Gardens. At the same time, participants had the opportunity to socialize, engage in meaningful activity, and contribute to the beautification of a public space.

The Dementia Friendly Gardening program demonstrates the powerful role that occupational therapy, community partnership, and nature-based activities can play in supporting connection, independence, and quality of life for people living with dementia.





STUDENT TESTIMONIALS

HERE'S WHAT SOME OF OUR STUDENTS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE:

"Working with people living with dementia and their care partners in the gardening program has been a rewarding experience which has taught me more about community-based occupational therapy. I enjoyed activities, such as planting, cooking, painting, and simply spending time outdoors which all promoted conversation and connection. Rocky Mountain Gardens is a beautiful space, and I am grateful they welcomed and allowed us to share it with the participants."

-Jenn Malotte, OT Student

"Participating in a gardening program with people with dementia and cognitive impairments at Rocky Mountain Garden has been uplifting and engaging. The unbridled joy and reminiscent anecdotes shared with the participants has been heartwarming. From participants talking about watching their parents garden to their own love and growth of personal gardens and seeing the cheerfulness in their faces has been a fantastic time. Getting my hands dirty alongside participants eager to dig in to soil has shown me the benefits of simply touching the earth and connecting with others.

Rocky Mountain Gardens provides an open, accessible space for people of all ages to be able to roam and explore, and now includes a sensory garden that was culminated by our participants! This opportunity for hands-on experience in a welcoming environment has increased my understanding of the importance of doing what we love and being with ourselves, no matter what an individual may be experiencing. Being able to participate in nurturing one's own ecosystem is an accomplishment and an experience to be proud of."

-Alex Gehring, OT Student



"It was deeply encouraging to interact with the participants as they reconnected with gardening, finding genuine joy in activities that had once been a regular part of their lives. Throughout the process, I was especially impressed by the commitment and care shown by the care partners, whose active participation was vital to the experience. It reinforced what an essential component care partners are in the client-care equation.

Additionally, this experience opened my eyes to the wealth of resources found at Rocky Mountain Gardens. Not only is it a beautiful, botanical space free and open for the public to enjoy, but it also offers a variety of education and community engagement opportunities including summer camps, a seed library, Tai Chi, assorted art and cooking instruction, and ecological education on invasive species, waterwise landscaping, and local pollinators."

-Becca Bauer, OT Student



"Participating in this program taught me about the wealth of knowledge that individuals living with dementia have, and their eagerness to share this with others when given the opportunity. Their positive attitudes, stories, and enthusiasm always brightened my day and reminded me of the importance for meaningful, inclusive, and community centered care for our aging populations."

-Sierra Hamilton, OT Student

“My time at the Rocky Mountain Gardens participating in dementia-friendly gardening was an absolutely wonderful experience, filled with a warmth and joy I will never forget. The participants brought such a positive energy to every single session, radiating a bright, resilient outlook on life that was truly inspiring. Working alongside them allowed me to see the occupation of gardening in a beautiful new light. From digging in the dirt to nurturing new plants, this became a powerful place that brought us all together. As we cared for plants, we weren't just learning about gardening; we were learning about and growing with each other, sharing stories and building meaningful connections. Watching our flowers and plants thrive has mirrored my own growth as an aspiring occupational therapist, adding to my love for working with this population. It was such an impactful experience, and I would recommend it again and again to anyone who is interested or who knows someone who might be!”

-Kaeli Pratt, OT Student

