

TRANSITIONS PROGRAM

HORTICULTURE THERAPY PRACTICES AND APPLICATION
FOR PRACTICAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR
ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)/Autism

- general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development
 - difficulties in social interaction
 - difficulties with verbal and nonverbal communication
 - repetitive behaviors
 - Rigidity in thinking and behaviours
 - Difficulty with executive functioning (planning, order of operations, initiative, decision making)
 - May result in small or no peer circle, limited access or success in community engagement



THE TRANSITIONS PROGRAM

- Employment readiness program for adults aged 18 + with a diagnosis of ASD
- 3-hour work day, 3 days a week
- 3:1 ratio in a structured and positive working environment
- Participants learn to engage actively in their communities and improve upon social skills while in year long community-based volunteer jobs
- Job shadowing employees with ASD of the Autism Society in a variety of roles (custodian, property team, kitchen team), carpentry, soft skill development – social and communicative expectations- and grounds work
- Following 8 months of volunteering and center-based learning, participants are hired on seasonally as part of our grounds and maintenance crew and work for pay for 4 months for Good Roots Gardening, an social enterprise run by the Autism Society



THE GARDENS

- 38 raised beds (and counting)
- Fruit tree orchard
- Berry gardens
- Edible flowers
- Participants learn and work in this outdoor classroom. From seed to harvest, participants engage in every aspect of food production
- Our harvest goes directly to our other social enterprise, The Pantry
- Participants harvest veggies, weigh and clean them and deliver them to our chef. An hour later we get to see patrons of the restaurant eat the food we have grown for them
- All proceeds from The Pantry go directly back into programming for persons with ASD and their families



OUR GREENSPACE, OUR CLASSROOM, OUR OFFICE

Transitions Program concentrates on learning and working in the outdoors. We use gardening, carpentry and farming as a way to teach functional employment readiness skills. During the winter and early spring months, participants are heavily involved in community based volunteerism, weekly art classes and monthly trips to the local library.

Given the area we are located, our favourite and most used space to learn in is the outdoors. Social, communicative and therapeutic benefits of learning in greenspaces has been life changing for the people we support.

Transferable skills to different employment paths – basic math/carpentry, measuring/cleaning, team work/independence.

Through gardening and farming, we teach how to make accurate assumptions, how to generalize, and how to work both independently and as part of a team.

The work has a lasting impact on the land, while developing skills and providing paid employment, but also providing a space of therapeutic enrichment. The work each group does allows for future participants to continue to work as well. The more we build, grow and tend to, the more that we have to do. The circle continues.

Our gardens are used by all who access our facility and the public as well. It is a place of calm, peace, and serenity, promoting Therapeutic Practice.



BRIDGES TO HOPE POTATO GARDEN

Transitions has volunteered at the food bank twice weekly for six years. This Fall we expect to harvest upwards of 150 pound of potatoes to help feed their clients. We partner with Gaze Seeds, who donate seed potatoes. This type of activity teaches empathy, a feeling often considered difficult to navigate, identify or teach to those with ASD. This initiative also shows how vital it is to have community support. One non profit supporting another, with a well loved local business in the middle – true community stewardship.



THE PARTICIPANTS BECOME THE TEACHERS

Transitions participants visited over 10 elementary schools and presented to close to 300 students this past Spring for our annual seed presentations. Our participants taught the children how to germinate bean seeds and how to make miniature greenhouses. Heartwarming, and a functional way for participants to practice and generalize numerous goals outside of our regular programming – planning and executing a presentation, public speaking, interacting with the youth and teachers, effectively dealing with the unexpected.

This will be our fourth year of this initiative and is a highlight each year.



HORTICULTURE THERAPY

Horticulture Therapy is the practice of using green mediums to address a number of issues with a client or patient, including but not limited to:

- Decreasing anxiety or depression and its accompanying symptoms
- Encouraging play based learning/encouraging re-introduction of skills once done in the past (elderly, dementia)
- Encouraging sensory stimulation and working to eliminate tactile defensiveness
- Encouraging verbal and non verbal communication
- Teaching calming techniques in a serene and gentle, natural atmosphere
- For clients with ASD we find the use of HT encourages speech and all forms of communication
- Sense of purpose and team work while working toward a common goal when tending to land and produce

Sensory Needs, Communication and Success

- A garden is visually stimulating. We talk about colours and patterns, gardening allows for conversation and quiet time to exist in unison.
- Being in a windy place, we talk a lot about the sounds in a garden and the calming effect the sounds of the leaves and trees can make as you work.
- In a more practical sense, working outdoors requires planning for dressing for the weather. Participants learn to follow weather reports, to pack appropriate clothing and to address needs around sunscreen, bug spray and hydration to ensure they are working safely and appropriately.
- Participants who may have food aversions – common with ASD, find themselves interested in trying new things – they want to eat the bean they grew, they want to taste the lettuce they cared for. There is a natural reinforcement built in.
- Mistakes happen – gardening is fun, messy, hard –we teach people to just go with it, to “switch gears” and to plan for alternatives.
- Inevitably, the behaviour of our participants changes – working outdoors allows for both space and connectivity – room to move around safely in greenspace, while working toward a common goal

Learning Outcomes

- We implement learning opportunities by working in small groups whereby the person's interests, strengths and needs are considered in every aspect of goal setting and program planning. With the participant, we set small and achievable goals and teach participants that the skills learned and used in gardening can and should be generalized into other areas of their lives, for example, raking the yard at work is like sweeping the floor at home, and filling a watering can requires similar skills to filling a sink to wash dishes. We teach participants to take accountability for time management and use gardening with a group as a way to further develop the social skills required for successful future employment – mainly through team work, accountability, decision making and responsibility.
- One of the biggest successes we see is an over all improvement in how the participants feel in their bodies and minds – healthy, strong, clear, alert. For many participants, the level of physical engagement during this program is the most they have had since they were children.
- Families report that participants are more confident and engaged within the home and when with their families in the community.
- Participants often encourage their families to engage in smaller scale gardening and farming at home as they are eager to continue to develop (and show off!) their new skills.

365 Greenhouse

Grand Opening slated for October 2019. Partnership with Iron and Earth, Trades NL, ACOA and ASNL.



Thanks for listening. Any questions or comments?

