



GrowTH
Therapeutic Horticulture
Learning Network

How to bring nature & gardening into your work

Seven steps from interest to a well-planned therapeutic horticulture program.



A STARTING POINT

Start with purpose, not the perfect garden

Plants and nature can create meaningful opportunities for participation, connection, learning and wellbeing across healthcare, recreation, education and community settings. You may already use gardening activities, have access to an underused courtyard or growing space, or be exploring whether therapeutic horticulture could complement your work. Wherever you begin, consider the people participating, the program's purpose, the setting, accessibility, safety, facilitation, evidence and fit with your professional role and organization.

This guide is not a linear pathway or a checklist to complete in order. Your starting point and route will depend on your background, setting, responsibilities and circumstances. Use the steps to find the questions most relevant to you now, then return to others as your practice develops.

A NOTE ON SCOPE

Use this guide to understand what to consider and where to go next. It does not replace therapeutic horticulture education or the professional knowledge needed to design and facilitate programs safely and effectively.

STEP 01 / UNDERSTAND THE PRACTICE

What is therapeutic horticulture?

Therapeutic horticulture (TH) is participation in plant, gardening and nature-based activities facilitated by a trained professional to support health, wellbeing, participation and other identified goals.

It can happen almost anywhere: sowing seeds in long-term care; propagating houseplants in a mental health program; growing herbs as part of rehabilitation; exploring seasonal plant materials with children; tending a community garden; or using sensory engagement with plants for someone unable to participate in traditional gardening tasks.

The activity alone does not make an experience therapeutic horticulture; intention matters. Consider who is participating, their strengths, interests and needs; what you want the experience to support; how participation can be meaningful and accessible; relevant safety considerations; facilitation; and how you will know whether it is meeting its purpose.

You do not need the perfect garden. Plant and nature-based experiences can happen indoors or outdoors, using tables, containers, raised beds, courtyards, patios, community spaces, established gardens or portable materials.

REFLECTION

What first sparked your interest?
Are you looking for new activities,
or developing a more intentional
therapeutic horticulture practice?



STEP 01 / UNDERSTAND THE PRACTICE (CONTINUED)

Gardening activity or therapeutic horticulture?

Gardening itself can be enjoyable, meaningful and beneficial. People do not need to be participating in a formal therapeutic horticulture program to benefit from time with plants or nature.

But adding a gardening activity to a program does not automatically make it therapeutic horticulture.

Consider two groups planting the same container of herbs.



Example 1

Participants are given the materials and instructions and invited to plant together because it is an enjoyable seasonal activity.



Example 2

The facilitator selects and adapts the same activity because participants are working toward particular goals. The planting process might intentionally provide opportunities for choice, fine-motor engagement, sequencing, sensory exploration, social interaction or meaningful reminiscence. Tools, materials, instructions and levels of assistance may also be adapted.

THE DISTINCTION

The plants may be the same. The planning, purpose and facilitation are different.

STEP 02 / BUILD ON YOUR FOUNDATION

Build on what you already know

Therapeutic horticulture is practiced by people from many professional backgrounds. You do not need to leave your existing professional identity behind. Often, the work is to add therapeutic horticulture knowledge to skills you already bring.

You may have experience building relationships, assessing interests and needs, setting goals, facilitating individuals or groups, adapting activities, supporting accessibility, managing risk, evaluating programs, caring for plants, or working with an interdisciplinary team. These capabilities matter.

At the same time, expertise in one area does not automatically establish competence in another. Strong clinical or facilitation skills may not include horticultural knowledge. Extensive gardening experience may not include therapeutic programming, participant safety or activity adaptation. Recognizing the boundary is part of thoughtful practice.



Different starting points



A recreation therapist, for example, may already understand assessment, goal setting, facilitation and evaluation but need greater horticultural knowledge and therapeutic horticulture-specific education.



A horticulture professional may bring extensive plant knowledge but need more education related to participant needs, therapeutic goals, facilitation, accessibility and working within health or human-service environments.

STEP 02 / BUILD ON YOUR FOUNDATION (CONTINUED)

Map your starting point



What is your role with the people you support?



What outcomes or goals are you responsible for?



What training and competencies do you already have?



Where might this work extend beyond your current knowledge?



When could another professional bring useful expertise?

REFLECTION

Name the professional knowledge, horticultural experience and facilitation skills you bring. Identify one or two areas where you want more knowledge.

STEP 03 / DEVELOP CAPABILITY

Get the knowledge and training you need

Interest is often where therapeutic horticulture begins. Building the knowledge to facilitate it thoughtfully comes next. Strong education should prepare practitioners to make decisions, not simply supply a list of appealing gardening projects.

Look for learning across therapeutic horticulture principles; participant-centred planning and goal development; therapeutic and interpersonal skills; facilitation and the therapeutic process; adaptation and accessibility; horticultural knowledge; safety and risk management; ethics and professional responsibility; and evaluation.

The right depth of training depends on what you plan to be responsible for. Someone seeking a foundational understanding may need something different from someone designing and facilitating an ongoing program. As responsibilities increase, the depth of knowledge should increase too.

Useful education helps you reason through how participant needs and goals inform activity choices, how safety and accessibility shape planning, how facilitation affects participation, and how to evaluate whether a program is meeting its purpose.

ASK BEFORE TAKING ON A RESPONSIBILITY

What am I planning to be responsible for?

What knowledge would I want before taking on that responsibility?



STEP 04 / LOOK AT YOUR SETTING

Identify the opportunity

Once you understand the practice and have begun building the knowledge you need, look at your own setting. Start with people and purpose—not plants and activities.



Begin with what matters to participants

Consider whether nature-based experiences could complement existing priorities: meaningful activity and participation, social connection, choice and autonomy, sensory or cognitive engagement, physical movement, emotional wellbeing, familiar interests and experiences, or time with plants and nature.



Notice what is already available

Look for garden beds, indoor plants, a courtyard, planters, gardening supplies, seasonal activities, staff with horticultural interests, or an existing recreation, rehabilitation, wellness or education program where this work could fit.



Connect with organizational priorities

Person-centred care, meaningful engagement, mental health and wellbeing, rehabilitation, social connection, accessible programming, quality of life, participant experience and interdisciplinary programming may all be relevant contexts to explore.

A USEFUL INTERSECTION

Strong opportunities sit where participant need or interest, professional and organizational goals, and a realistic role for plants and nature meet.

STEP 04 / LOOK AT YOUR SETTING (CONTINUED)

Identify the opportunity

COMPLETE THE SENTENCE

Therapeutic horticulture may be worth exploring in my setting because...

THEN IDENTIFY

The population or group you would begin with

One need or goal that already matters

One realistic way therapeutic horticulture could complement the work already being done

STEP 05 / MAKE THE CASE

Build support with evidence

You may see a clear opportunity while a manager, clinical lead, administrator or funding decision-maker does not yet. Help them understand what therapeutic horticulture is, why it is relevant, what evidence exists, how it connects with an organizational need, what would be required, and what you are asking them to approve.

Begin with the need or opportunity—not the activity. Then explain the practice clearly: the intentional use of plants, gardening and nature-based experiences to support health, wellbeing, participation and other identified goals, with activities selected and adapted for participants, setting and purpose.

Use evidence carefully. Research varies across populations, interventions, settings and study designs. It can help decision-makers understand what has been studied and whether an approach may be relevant; it does not guarantee an outcome for a particular participant.

Make the request practical

Connect the people you support and an existing priority with relevant evidence. Ask for a manageable next step: approval for training, time to gather interest, a meeting with relevant colleagues, or support to develop a pilot proposal.

KEEP THE ASK FOCUSED

Ask for the next step,
not everything at once.



STEP 05 / MAKE THE CASE (CONTINUED)

Begin with the need, not the activity

**INSTEAD OF**

"I would like to start a gardening program."

**TRY**

"We're looking for additional ways to support meaningful engagement among residents living with dementia. Therapeutic horticulture may offer another structured way to support sensory engagement, social interaction and meaningful participation."

Make a specific request

**For example**

"I would like approval to complete foundational therapeutic horticulture training and then develop a proposal for a small pilot program for review."

A specific request gives a decision-maker something concrete to consider without requiring a commitment to a full program immediately.

REFLECTION

Who needs to understand or support this idea before you can move forward?

Identify:

1. The need or opportunity you want to address
2. Evidence that supports exploring TH
3. Why it may be relevant in your setting
4. The specific next step you would like to request

STEP 05 / MAKE THE CASE (CONTINUED)

Use evidence responsibly

Therapeutic horticulture research varies across populations, interventions, settings and study designs. Research rarely tells us that a particular program will produce a guaranteed outcome for a particular participant.



AVOID

"Therapeutic horticulture has been proven to reduce depression."



INSTEAD

"Research examining horticulture-based programs with people experiencing mental health challenges has reported improvements in outcomes including mood and wellbeing in some studies."

The purpose of the evidence is not to promise an outcome. It can help decision-makers understand what is currently known and whether the approach may be relevant to the need you have identified.



the people
you support



an existing
priority



relevant
evidence



For example

"Research with older adults has examined horticulture-based programming in relation to outcomes including engagement, social interaction and quality of life. Meaningful engagement is already a priority within our program, so I would like to explore whether therapeutic horticulture could offer another way to support that goal."

One or two strong connections are often more useful than a long list of possible benefits.

STEP 05 / MAKE THE CASE (CONTINUED)

Tools to help you start the conversation

Therapeutic Horticulture Information Sheet

A customizable handout for introducing therapeutic horticulture to colleagues and decision-makers.

Internal Request Template

An editable starting point for introducing therapeutic horticulture within your organization and requesting an appropriate next step.

External Outreach Email Template

An editable template for introducing therapeutic horticulture to an external organization, partner or potential client.

Decision-Maker Talking Points

Practical guidance to help you prepare for common questions about training, evidence, safety, resources and implementation.

Therapeutic Horticulture Evidence Summaries

Plain-language summaries of selected research across key populations to help you build an evidence-informed case.

Access the toolkit

STEP 06 / BEGIN RESPONSIBLY

Start thoughtfully and at the right scale

A thoughtful start is usually more useful than a large one. You do not need a dedicated therapeutic garden, a substantial budget or a year-long curriculum. A clear purpose, appropriate knowledge and enough support matter for beginning responsibly.

Before selecting activities, identify who the program is intended to support; their needs, interests or goals; why therapeutic horticulture is appropriate; what meaningful participation could look like; and what you hope to learn.

Ensure the person planning and facilitating has appropriate therapeutic horticulture knowledge and training for their role, population and setting. Consider whether additional expertise, consultation or interdisciplinary support is needed.

Six areas to consider before beginning

People — Who will participate, and what needs, abilities and interests are relevant?

Purpose — What is the program intended to support?

Training — Does the facilitator have the appropriate knowledge?

Safety — What participant, plant, tool and environmental risks need to be addressed?

Accessibility — How will meaningful participation be supported?

Organizational support & resources — Who needs to be consulted? What space, staffing, materials, time and support are required?

Learn from the experience by paying attention to participant engagement, feedback, progress toward identified goals, staff observations and the practical feasibility of delivering the program.

REFLECTION

What would a realistic first step look like in your setting?

STEP 06 / BEGIN RESPONSIBLY (CONTINUED)



“ When I started a new role, I began with a four-week pilot, one session a week. It gave participants a chance to see what the program was all about, and gave me a chance to get to know them, their interests and their strengths. We started with only a few participants, but five years later, it had grown into a thriving program!

Katie McGillivray, HTR, Learning & Community Lead

Start with what is manageable

A first initiative might be a pilot, a short program series or an enhancement to an existing service. Beginning at a smaller scale gives you an opportunity to learn what works in your environment before committing significant time or resources.

A manageable first step might involve:

- ✓ One participant group
- ✓ A clearly defined purpose
- ✓ A limited number of sessions
- ✓ An existing indoor or outdoor space
- ✓ Appropriate staff support
- ✓ A realistic materials budget
- ✓ A simple way to gather feedback

STEP 07 / KEEP DEVELOPING

Keep learning and stay connected

Therapeutic horticulture practice develops over time. Training provides an important foundation, while real-world practice raises new questions: how to adapt activities, choose plants, respond to participant needs, improve facilitation and evaluation, or find relevant research.

Keep building knowledge through professional learning, practical resources and evidence. Learn from other practitioners. An adaptation developed in long-term care may be useful in rehabilitation; an approach for limited space may transfer to another setting. Colleagues from other disciplines may see a participant need from a perspective you had not considered.

As your practice develops, it helps to have places to turn for continued education, practical tools and templates, research, professional discussion, program ideas, questions from practice and opportunities to learn from others in the field.

The GrowTH Network was created to provide this kind of support beyond a single course, bringing together professional learning, practical resources, research and connection with others developing therapeutic horticulture practice.

CONNECTION MATTERS

You do not need to work through every new question on your own.



NEXT STEPS

Where do you go from here?

You do not need to have every step mapped out from the beginning. What matters is having a clear sense of what comes next for you.

You might build foundational knowledge, seek approval for training, approach a manager, explore where therapeutic horticulture could fit within your organization, or find ongoing professional support as your practice develops.

Return to the How to Bring Nature & Gardening Into Your Work Toolkit to:

- Explore therapeutic horticulture training
- Access editable advocacy templates
- Learn more about the GrowTH Network
- Find additional research and practical resources

Use the Toolkit to choose a next step that fits your role, setting and where you are in your practice.

Access the toolkit

The goal is not simply to bring more gardening activities into professional settings. It's to develop the knowledge, intention and support to integrate plants and nature into professional practice with purpose. We're here to support your TH journey!

~Alexis & Katie

