

## Healing with horticulture

*by Josie Padro*

Horticultural therapist Coral Ayerst harnesses the positive power of gardening in her work with her clients in long-term care, many of whom have complicated chronic health problems that prevent them from heavy gardening work. “The way I interpret horticulture therapy,” says Ms. Ayerst, “is to [use nature to improve overall well-being.](#)” After speaking to her clients about their lives and past experiences she creates an individual program for each person. “We have a lot of people who grew up on farms,” she says. “I bring in samples of wheat and oats and barley and a lot of time they can identify them and talk about their experiences on the farm.

Other people might be from the Okanagan and so we would do a session on varieties of apples or pears and other seasonal fruit.” [Hands-on horticulture therapy is a year-round activity.](#) Spring and summer are perfect times to take residents outside to work on raised beds, or simply to observe the growing plants. Even though her clients have their meals cooked for them, they enjoy giving away the food they’ve grown; it’s a way they feel they are contributing. In the colder months, Ms. Ayerst brings the gardening indoors. Using adjustable table tops, the seniors are able to continue their work with plants, arranging flowers, potting bulbs, or starting seeds. Ms. Ayers believes everyone can benefit from any kind of activity that allows them to stay connected to nature. “I think it really reduces stress and it’s a distraction from pain,” she says.

**Even tending a small container of something green and growing—whether it’s a savoury herb, an edible plant or a fragrant flower— can elicit happiness and a sense of accomplishment.**

