

The Role of Horticulture Therapy in Stress Management

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ABSTRACT

Chronic stress is a growing public health concern linked to cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression, and impaired immune function. Among the range of non-pharmacological interventions developed to address this problem, horticulture therapy (HT), the structured use of gardening and plant-based activities under professional guidance, has emerged as a low-cost, accessible, and evidence-supported approach to stress reduction. This article examines the theoretical foundations of horticulture therapy, including the Stress Reduction Theory and Attention Restoration Theory, and reviews the physiological, psychological, and social mechanisms through which garden-based activity lowers stress. It further explores practical applications across clinical, workplace, educational, and community settings, and considers the limitations and future directions of the field. The evidence suggests that horticulture therapy offers a holistic, multisensory pathway to stress relief that complements conventional mental health treatment and can be integrated into a wide range of care and wellness programs.

Keywords: Horticulture therapy; Stress management; Green care; Nature-based intervention; Mental health; Wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Stress is an unavoidable feature of modern life, arising from work pressures, financial insecurity, social demands, and environmental change. Left unmanaged, chronic stress disrupts the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevates cortisol levels, and increases vulnerability to a wide range of physical and mental health disorders. While pharmacological treatments and conventional psychotherapy remain central to stress and anxiety management, there is increasing interest in complementary, nature-based interventions that are affordable, sustainable, and suitable for diverse populations.

Horticulture therapy, sometimes called therapeutic horticulture or green care, is one such intervention. It involves engaging individuals in gardening and plant-related activities, guided by a trained therapist or facilitator, to achieve specific therapeutic goals. Unlike casual gardening as a hobby, horticulture therapy is a structured, goal-oriented practice often used in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools, prisons, and elder-care facilities. This article reviews how and why horticulture therapy works as a stress-management tool and outlines its practical applications.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Stress Reduction Theory (SRT)

Roger Ulrich's Stress Reduction Theory proposes that exposure to natural environments triggers rapid, largely automatic reductions in physiological arousal. Viewing or interacting with vegetation is theorized to shift the autonomic nervous system away from a sympathetic (fight-or-flight) state toward a parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) state, lowering heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension.

2.2 Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

Kaplan and Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory suggests that natural settings possess qualities (being away, extent, fascination, and compatibility) that allow directed attention to rest and recover from mental fatigue. Gardening tasks, which require gentle, absorbing focus rather than effortful concentration, are thought to replenish cognitive resources depleted by daily stressors.

2.3 Biophilia Hypothesis

E.O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis holds that humans possess an innate affinity for nature and living systems. Horticulture therapy leverages this inherent connection, using direct contact with soil, plants, and growth cycles to foster feelings of calm, purpose, and connectedness.

3. Mechanisms of Stress Reduction Through Horticulture Therapy

3.1 Physiological Mechanisms

- **Cortisol reduction:** Multiple studies have measured salivary cortisol before and after gardening sessions, finding significant decreases comparable to or greater than other relaxation activities.
- **Autonomic regulation:** Reduced heart rate variability disturbances and lower blood pressure have been observed following horticultural activity.
- **Physical activity benefits:** Digging, planting, and weeding provide light-to-moderate exercise, which independently supports endorphin release and improved sleep.

3.2 Psychological Mechanisms

- **Mindfulness and present-moment focus:** Repetitive tasks like potting or pruning encourage a meditative state, reducing rumination.
- **Sense of accomplishment:** Nurturing a plant from seed to bloom provides tangible evidence of progress, boosting self-efficacy and mood.
- **Emotional regulation:** Caring for living things offers a non-verbal outlet for emotional expression, particularly valuable for individuals who struggle with talk-based therapy.

3.3 Social Mechanisms

- **Community and belonging:** Group gardening projects foster social interaction, reducing isolation, a known stress amplifier.
- **Skill-building and purpose:** Structured horticultural programs often build vocational or life skills, contributing to a sense of meaning that buffers against stress.

4. Applications in Practice

Table 1: Applications of horticulture therapy in different settings and reported benefits

Setting	Application	Reported benefit
Hospitals and rehabilitation centers	Garden-based sessions for patients recovering from illness, surgery, or addiction	Reduced anxiety, improved mood, faster perceived recovery
Workplaces	On-site gardens or "green break" programs	Lower burnout, improved concentration, reduced sick days
Schools	Garden-based learning for students with attention or behavioral difficulties	Improved focus, reduced classroom stress behaviors
Elder care	Sensory gardens for residents with dementia	Reduced agitation, improved sleep, enhanced quality of life
Community and correctional programs	Group allotment or urban farming projects	Increased social cohesion, reduced recidivism-linked stress

5. Limitations and Considerations

Despite promising findings, horticulture therapy research faces methodological challenges, including small sample sizes, short intervention periods, and variability in program design that make standardization difficult. Access to outdoor or greenhouse space can also be a barrier in urban or resource-limited settings, though indoor and container-based adaptations have shown similar benefit. As with any complementary intervention, horticulture therapy should be viewed as a supplement to, not a replacement for, professional mental health care in cases of clinical anxiety or depression.

6. Future Directions

Future research would benefit from larger randomized controlled trials, longer follow-up periods, and standardized outcome measures (e.g., cortisol assays, validated stress inventories) to strengthen the evidence base. There is also growing interest in

combining horticulture therapy with digital tools such as guided garden-based mindfulness apps and in tailoring programs for specific populations, including veterans, healthcare workers, and students, who face distinct sources of chronic stress.

7. Conclusion

Horticulture therapy offers a multisensory, evidence-informed approach to stress management that draws on humans' innate connection to nature. By combining physical activity, mindful engagement, and social interaction, it addresses stress through physiological, psychological, and social pathways simultaneously. As mental health systems increasingly seek affordable, sustainable, and holistic interventions, horticulture therapy stands out as a practical option worth wider integration into clinical and community wellness programs.

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