

Helping Veterans Heal

Recovery Takes Root in the Buehler Enabling Garden

Serving the needs of returning veterans is a growing priority for the Chicago Botanic Garden's Horticultural Therapy Services department. For more than 30 years the Garden has provided consultation, training, and direct services in horticultural therapy, primarily through the Buehler Enabling Garden, which opened in 1999. Since then, horticultural therapy staff have worked with more than 200 health and human service agencies to provide life enrichment activities centered on the healing effects of working with plants. While the Garden has had programming with veterans for many years, it has mostly been off-site—until now.

This past summer, the Garden introduced a new program through the Thresholds Veterans Project. Thresholds is a large mental health agency with a mission to transform the lives of people struggling with mental illness. The Veterans Project is specifically designed to support returning veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and other emotional challenges.

Headquartered in the Enabling Garden, the program consisted of a series of six retreats to the Garden for 15 veterans and their therapists. During the three-hour retreats, participants engaged in a variety of activities ranging from journaling to summer planting projects to creating memorial garden stones. “By exposing them to low-impact exercises with walks through the Garden, and offering an opportunity for artistic self-expression, we hope

to have provided these vets with a way to improve their well-being,” said the Enabling Garden’s coordinator of five years, Alicia Green.

Barbara Kreski, director of horticultural therapy services, is gratified that the Thresholds program seeks veterans of recent conflicts. “This group is harder to reach,” she said.

“They are spread throughout the city and suburbs, and often feel it is easier to fit in if they do not identify themselves as recent vets.” The veterans’ scattered locations and the sense of otherness that comes from having been out of the country and doing very different things than their neighbors makes many of them keep to themselves. Kreski noted that it has been “a real

accomplishment” for Green to get the program going.

“Reintegration into society can be difficult,” Green explained about the returning veterans. “Often they experience hypervigilance and feelings of anger and rage that can be stressful.” Spending time in nature is a good way to calm those symptoms, and the Enabling Garden program teaches veterans how to use nature to self-soothe.

Green lights up when asked to describe the most rewarding part of her job. “The look on people’s faces,” she said. “Our horticultural therapy program just makes people happy.”

For more about the Garden’s Horticultural Therapy Services program, visit chicagobotanic.org/therapy. Read more about the Buehler Enabling Garden at chicagobotanic.org/explore/enabling.



Buehler Enabling Garden coordinator Alicia Green works with a veteran in the garden.

