

CULTIVATE

FLORIDA HORTICULTURE FOR HEALTH NETWORK

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The Florida Horticulture for Health Network's vision: To promote activities and connect organizations to each other and resources that use horticulture to improve health including therapeutic horticulture and horticultural therapy, landscapes for health, nature, emerging professional support, allied horticulture and health services, community and school gardens, and food action initiatives.

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Spooky Succulents: Halloween Market Fun at Vizcaya Village

By Joanna Brown

Graphic by Vizcaya; Photos by Scott Martin

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens hosts events at Vizcaya Village Market on Sundays throughout the year including Fall and Halloween. Therapeutic horticulture practitioner Joanna Brown of Restorative Horticultural Therapy worked with [Vizcaya](#) and 150 participants in 2024 to create individual mini Halloween-themed succulent gardens. This is the first of a series of free-flowing therapeutic horticulture workshops for all ages. They are free events and open to the public, with funding provided by Vizcaya. This activity presented the opportunity for participants to design their own mini succulent garden with a Halloween twist. In this fun-filled session, both adults and children were encouraged to unleash their creativity to craft a 4" succulent garden that captures

the spirit of Halloween. Participants conjured mini spooky tiny landscapes filled with insects and bats, whimsical witch's gardens, and mini-insect graveyards complete with towering crassula and walking skeletons.

Activity details: Spooky Succulents therapeutic horticulture activity offered a delightful escape into nature's wonders of resilient succulents. This event was 'free flowing' in which the 2-hour scheduled event time slot consisted of a continuous offering of the activity where participants who were at the market, could drop in to create a succulent garden. This activity was designed for all ages and included parents, grandparents, children, and garden visitors. It was a simple yet effective wellness activity

requiring minimal direction and supervision, the ideal combination for delivering wellness TH in an outdoor public garden setting to a large number of participants. The activity offered a variety of emotional/psychological benefits including the opportunity to embrace the present moment, exercising creativity, reducing stress levels, enhancing mood, and making social connections in a supportive and safe environment. Connections to nature in this outdoor setting - feeling stones, soil, touching plants, breathing fresh air, and dancing (exercising) to the Vizcaya DJ playing Halloween themed music were fun and healthy.

Set up and logistics: The outdoor activity took place amongst large banyan trees which provided shade and a beautiful welcoming nature setting. Prior to the start of the event individual picnic tables were placed in a U shape accommodating 10 people per table. Vizcaya village coordinator and TH practitioner planned for a total of 100 attendees; this number was exceeded! The TH practitioner planned for each participant to complete the activity in a maximum of 30 minutes per group, 4 groups of 25 people throughout the scheduled 2 hours. This was a great opportunity for the TH practitioner to pivot from the original activity plan, evolving into the free-flowing cycle of people, with material distribution assistance provided by Vizcaya's program manager who then directed them to the practitioner who adapted and set up at a table, offering succulent cuttings and directions.



Materials: Supplies were purchased to accommodate up to 100 participants with additional supplies as a backup. Soil and small stones were placed on baking trays on each picnic table alongside a large variety of Halloween party favors including life size insects, bats, mini glow in the dark skeletons and eyes, and snakes. Eight oz plastic squeeze bottles filled with water, Halloween stickers, popsicle sticks, and markers were also on each table. Each place setting consisted of two succulent cuttings and a 4" plastic pot. Practitioner provided 250 small succulent cuttings ranging 1-5" in size. Succulent cuttings included crassula, echeverias, sedum rosettes, as well as an additional large mature dwarf jade, which provided about 20 2-3" cut pieces.

Challenges: As the event got busier, keeping track of succulent quantity proved difficult. Requesting participants to only take 2 succulent cuttings per person was a challenge. An alternative would be to direct participants to a previously set up supply table and have a volunteer hand out supplies to each person. Succulent cuttings are expensive and time consuming to care for prior to the event. Facilitator discovered purchasing large full mature succulents from a wholesale nursery then cutting 2 or 3” pieces off of the large plant is the most cost-efficient alternative to purchasing a large amount of succulent cuttings. Providing step by step directions was challenging due to the DJ and the large number of people constantly entering the event. Facilitator quickly adapted by visiting each table, providing visual cues/demonstration, and assisting as needed. Placing succulent planting/care cards at each table for participants to take away ensured good *after session* plant care.

Joanna’s Brown, BA is currently doing a Masters in Social Work at University of South Florida. She holds a Certificate in Horticultural Therapy from the Horticultural Therapy Institute and a BA in humanities, social sciences, and environmental studies. She is the founder of Horticulture For Healing, a nonprofit advocating for therapeutic horticulture in less privileged communities, and the owner of Restorative Horticultural Therapy specializing in working with clients experiencing substance use and co-occurring disorders, collaborating with organizations related to this diverse population. Her [THAD Spooky Succulent Gardens](#) is now available online.



10 Holiday Ideas for Therapeutic Horticulture Programming

By Lesley Fleming, HTR, Eleanor Moriarty Wroath, Mikkele Lawless, Nancy Ellis,
Betty Guise, LSW & Bree Stark

Photos by Bedford Tribune, Garden Therapy, Connecticut Public Journal, M. Rhodes, D. Lorraine,
Mother Earth Living, L. Fleming, Lamplust, B. Guise & WFAE

Holiday time and its many celebrations offer infinite ideas for hands-on activities for people-plant programming. Ten ideas, drawn from THAD ([therapeutic horticulture activities database](#)) should provide inspiration and therapeutic goals appropriate for most populations. Most are budget friendly.



Fall Leaf Luminaries - Used indoors or outside along walkways with battery candles, the decoupage leaf jars brighten any holiday. Flat live, fabric or paper leaves work best. (top left)



Scents of Nature at Christmas – Making a small arrangement with fragrant pine and other greenery is pleasant, can be gifted, and for bereaved individuals, can be therapeutic for sensory and other reasons. (top right)



Amaryllis Bulb Planting & Amaryllis Waxing – Starting bulbs as gifts, so that their growth can be enjoyed by the recipient brings life, joy and color. Waxing bulbs, a newer technique, eliminates the need to water while providing color on the bulbs and in the home. Decorate with glitter too! (middle left)



Button Wreath Cards – Reasoning and sorting skills are put into play creating cards with colorful buttons. THAD shares info on altruism, directly related to this activity. (middle right)



Holiday Herbal Wreath – Herbs and spices like rosemary, bay leaves and dried fruit are attached to a wire wreath form, to make a fragrant non-edible decoration, memorializing a loved one or as a gift for family and friends. (bottom right)



Cinnamon Stick Holiday Ornament – Bundle cinnamon sticks together and tie

with ribbon. Versions of this can be stars, reindeers, or a tree with ribbon tied along the stick. Enchanting for holiday trees. (bottom left on previous page)



Xmas Ornament Walnut “Strawberry” – Transforming walnuts into strawberries can be fanciful, with fine motor and hand dexterity skill practice. Create new traditions with new ornaments. (top left)



Mini Evergreen Doorknob Decorations – Smaller than a wreath but using fragrant evergreen cuttings and pine cones, decorating doorknobs is festive especially with colorful ribbon and bells. (top right)



Gifts of Gratitude – Appropriate gifts for anyone, and particularly impactful given to people who have supported bereaved individuals. Three gift ideas with directions: edible treat packets, cards or framed pictures using scrapbook materials, and herbal tea or hot chocolate blends. (bottom left)



Ring in the New Year with Plant Connections – Celebrate many cultures and their new year traditions where plants play a role. Mandarins, apricots, peaches, kumquats, and branches forced to bloom symbolize good luck, renewal and hope. (bottom right)

Holiday therapeutic horticulture activities were drawn from THAD (therapeutic horticulture activities database), written by the practitioners listed in the byline. The article was compiled by Lesley Fleming, HTR.



Recycling Christmas Trees Support the Environment

Text by Lesley Fierning, HTR
Photo & graphics by Yana Yana & J. Brown

For plant enthusiasts, Christmas fanatics and people who love the traditions from yesteryear, having a fresh Christmas tree is wonderful on so many levels. Live Christmas trees are considered a sustainable renewable resource; growers' horticultural practices include planting more seedlings than harvested trees. The release of oxygen and absorption of carbon dioxide during growth is beneficial to the environment, impactful for fighting climate change, as is the practice of recycling or mulching Christmas trees (Nature Conservancy, 2025).

Consumer preferences for Christmas trees purchased during the holidays identify the top three varieties: Balsam Fir with soft needles, strong fragrance in the classic shape; Fraser Fir with durability for needles and fragrance; and Blue Fir, bluish green color with a double needle look. Availability may be related to geographical location or established shipping/vendor relationships. Recommendations include choosing healthy trees that are not dried out, pinching a few branches by sliding fingers to the end or lifting the tree, and thudding it on the ground. In either scenario, if needles fall off, the tree is not as fresh as it could be. Keeping the tree outdoors in a protected area until it is ready to be used, where cooler temperatures are available is recommended, though this will be hard for Southerners and warm climates.

Other tips for keeping a Christmas tree at its best for the holidays. Make a fresh perpendicular not diagonal cut of $\frac{1}{2}$ -1" to allow for better water absorption, removing the callous growth from the original cut. Place a Christmas tree bag under tree stands for tree removal. These can be hidden under stand, or tree skirt. Use a stand that holds fresh water and add water daily (1 quart of water per inch of stem diameter) (NCTA, 2024). Water immediately upon arrival home. Some recommend the first drink should be boiling water to improve absorption and sap removal. Avoid additives, fertilizer, and don't let pets drink from the stand. Find a location for the tree away from heat sources, ceiling fans or vents which will more quickly dry the tree out. Using humidifiers or spritzing the tree is recommended as are LED bulbs with low heat output and energy efficiency. And take the tree down before it is too dry. Consider [tree recycling](#) available in most communities at curbside, drop-off recycling centers, tree recycling/mulching programs, or cut up for yard waste removal. Other recycling options: bird feeders, mulch, fish feeders sunk in private ponds, soil erosion barriers, paths for hiking trails or living rooted trees.

National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA). (2024). How to care for our farm grown Christmas tree. [Realchristmastrees.org](https://www.realchristmastrees.org).
The Nature Conservancy. (2025). [Real vs. fake—Which Christmas tree is better for the environment?](#) [Nature.org](https://www.nature.org).



Series: Part 4 of 5

Practitioner Tool: Therapeutic Horticulture Goals with THAD Activity Examples: Sensory Domain

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR
Photo by Goodplayguide.com

Sensory stimulation is a foundational element within horticultural therapy and therapeutic horticulture because of the experiential nature of plant and gardening activities that are part of practice. In more recent years, HT/TH body of knowledge has expanded to include less well-known senses of – proprioception, interoception and vestibular sense of balance, along with the primary five senses (Fleming & Grimes, 2024; Gabaldo, 2019; Fleming et al., 2025). This reflects greater awareness across therapeutic disciplines of sensory processing, sensory integration therapy and self-regulation interventions related to sensory inputs (Ayers, 1972; Gomez et al., 2021; Dean, 2019).

“Therapeutic goals are an essential component of therapeutic horticulture practice. In this fourth in the 5-part series, therapeutic goals are identified by the sensory health domain, intended to be used as an index for identifying possible goals. The final article in this series will cover the social health domain along with relevant therapeutic goals (Fleming, 2025). Previously published articles have covered [cognitive/intellectual](#), [physical](#), and [psychological/emotional](#) health domains. In each article and domain, examples from THAD ([therapeutic horticulture activities database](#)) have been selected to demonstrate applications for use in therapeutic horticulture interventions.

Setting therapeutic goals is based on client assessment and need, working toward specific outcomes, which can be measured informally or clinically charted. Achieving desired health outcomes requires intention, therapeutic techniques and client engagement.

Therapeutic goals can fall into more than one health domain. The THAD examples identify multiple therapeutic goals in each of the five domains for each activity, though typically only one or two would be emphasized in a given session.

A *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture* article, [Therapeutic Horticulture and Its Therapeutic Goals: Expanding the Scope and Practice Through the Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database and Its Use of Health Domain-Specific Goals](#) organizes TH goals also using health domains, referring to functional and goal areas, not specific therapeutic goals (Fleming et al., 2025).

This series—[Practitioner Tool](#)—identifies specific therapeutic goals intended to expand practitioner knowledge and applications” (Fleming, 2025a, b, c).

Sensory Health Domain: Therapeutic Goal + THAD Activity Examples

| Goal Areas | Therapeutic Goal | THAD Examples |
|------------------|---|--|
| Visual | Use visual sense to distinguish between colors | Color Wheel Challenge with Plants (Fleming, Bethel & Hildinger, 2024) |
| Tactile | Expand tactile skills across populations & with visually impaired people | Seed Mosaic Heart (Fleming & Bethel, 2025) |
| Gustatory | Evaluate & distinguish between flavors | Blackberry Iced Tea - Depression (Fleming, 2025) |
| Olfactory | Use sense of smell for task | Stargazer Lilies at the Kentucky Oaks (Supports Breast Cancer Awareness) (Fleming & Bethel, 2025) |
| Auditory | Strengthen auditory skills | Sounds from Gardening (Fleming & Carroll, 2025) |
| Interoception | Expand recognition of interoception internal signals like itchy skin, avoidance (heart racing) | Black-Eyed Susans @ the Preakness Stakes (Fleming, 2025) |
| Proprioception | Improve proprioception body awareness; perform tasks without looking at hands or feet for example | Spots, Dots & Stripes on Variegated Leaves (Fleming & Hildinger, 2025) |
| Vestibular Sense | Demonstrate improved modulation of vestibular sense of balance | Sensory Bin (Fleming & Bethel, 2024) |

| Goal Areas | Therapeutic Goal | THAD Examples |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Self-Regulation | Practice self-regulation | Foliage Bouquet (Fleming, 2025) |
| | Develop autonomic and appropriate responses to sensations | Bird Feeder (Mortada & Fleming, 2024) |
| | Self-select appropriate sensory break | Fascination with Fasciation (Hildinger, Fleming, Morgan, Stark & Sterling, 2025) |
| | Practice swinging, bouncing, spinning to regulate sensory response | Outdoor Obstacle Course: Swinging & Spinning (Stivland, 2024) |
| | Increase tolerance for non-preferred task | Earth Day Hanging Kokedama (Sherman, 2023) |
| Sensory Tolerance | Expand ability, tolerance and willingness to engage in sensory activities | Playing with Soil, Sand & Water (Fleming & Stivland, 2024) |
| | Address sensory challenges like defensiveness to tactile, olfactory, or gustatory stimuli | Foot & Hand “Bath” with Fresh Herbs (Fleming & Relf, 2023) |
| | Attend to seated activity for 10 min. following sensory activity | That’s Bananas (Carroll & Fleming, 2024) |
| Sensory Motor | Expand sensory motor skills | Spring Kokedama in Vases (Poláčková, 2024) |
| | Practice hand-eye motor integration | Balancing Stones/Creating Rock Towers (Clark, Shortridge & Schultz, 2025) |
| | Practice sensory integration using several senses | Origami Calendar with Seeds & Pressed Flowers (Miyake, 2023) |
| | Practice integrating mind-body | Bookmarks with Dried Flowers (Fleming, Ellis & Bethel, 2025) |
| | Increase confidence in responding to sensory inputs or adverse reactions | Beach Sunflowers & Resiliency (Fleming, 2025) |
| | Practice being outside to tolerate sensory elements (wind, rain, soil) | Propagating Herbs by Division (Fleming & Relf, 2023) |
| | Enhance mood through sensory stimulation | Spooky Succulent Gardens (Brown, 2025) |
| | Identify personal alertness level | Care of Houseplants (Sullivan & Fleming, 2023) |

With the publications of THAD (therapeutic horticulture activities database), there is evidence of HT/TH practitioners including greater number of goals in the sensory domain. As noted previously, the role of sensory inputs to human functioning, especially self-regulation, sensory integration critical to developmental skills particularly for children, and sensory health challenges experienced across populations are emerging as important factors for HT/TH interventions. Practice is now identifying therapeutic sensory goals addressing trauma, military health challenges – mental health and sexual assault, along with medical diagnoses involving sensory processing deficits (Autism CRC, 2024; Whitehouse et al., 2020; Polackova et al., 2023). Developments in therapeutic horticulture practice are advancing particularly in this health domain. A recent publication, *Youth Sensory Gardening Manual* (2025) provides insights into the connections between gardening, sensory health domain and interventions that can be incorporated.

This listing of goals is not definitive, but is intended to broaden practitioner understanding and application of therapeutic goals for therapeutic horticulture delivered to multiple populations.

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Lesley Fleming, HTR has delivered therapeutic horticulture to a variety of populations using specific therapeutic goals. She has led the THAD advisory team in developing the on-line database of therapeutic horticulture activities and their correlated therapeutic goals across health domains. Leah Diehl, RLA, HTM and Katie Grimes, HTR, MAT contributed to this article.



Therapeutic Activities for Youth Sensory Gardens

Text & photos by Katie Grimes, MAT, HTR

Gardening is, by its very nature, a multi-sensory experience. Dig into most gardens, and the participant might feel soft or gritty soil in their hands as an earthy scent fills the nostrils. Cool water may cascade from a hose, changing the color and consistency of the soil, filling a receptacle, or leaving droplets on leaves. Colorful flowers, nuanced shades of foliage, and plant structures that range from wispy to hefty may catch the eye or tickle the ear when moved. Even if the plants are not edible, the tongue tastes what the nose smells, and the five external senses are engaged. Simultaneously, the internal senses of the [vestibular system](#), [interoception](#), and [proprioception](#) are also tapped by many typical gardening experiences. Walking or navigating, turning, resting, squatting, bending, lifting, and noting one's internal responses to temperature, humidity, hunger or thirst, and safety stimulate or soothe these internal senses, addressing the eight senses in total.

What then defines a Sensory Garden and makes it aptly suited to address therapeutic goals? Intentional design and Intentional use.

Dr. Amy Wagenfeld, PhD, OTR/L, SCEM, FAOTA, expands on these intentions in a new resource. [Youth Sensory Gardening Manual](#) written by Wagenfeld and published online by the American Horticultural Society (AHS) is intended to support and improve children's health. Collaborating with Kids Cancer Connection, AHS will provide over 200 hospitals with the manual, and it is available free to others.



The manual provides science-based information on the eight senses, sensory systems, sensory integration and sensory processing in an easily understandable format. This information provides the foundation for developing or expanding gardens (at hospitals and other locations) so that gardens are inclusively sensitive to all children's abilities and varying degrees of sensory tolerances - hyposensitivity or hypersensitivity. It promotes self-regulation challenges, and fun, positive experiences in a garden.

For each of the 8 senses, Wagenfeld gives specific guidelines for garden design, passive and active experiences that occur there, and a social story that a facilitator can use to lead a participant through a sensory engagement. This social story taps participant self-awareness and honors their decision to seek or retract from the sensory input; to like or dislike the experience.

When working in sensory gardens, a therapeutic horticulture practitioner benefits from having a variety of intentional activities as tools, especially when engaging the same children or the same group of children in multiple sessions. The following section provides descriptions of multisensory-based activities for children and youth that can be adapted to meet different goals.

Scavenger Hunts: Scavenger hunts invite children to come into close contact with a variety of plant materials for sensory exploration. Variations include a color or shape hunt to engage sight; a texture hunt for the sense of touch; an aroma hunt for sweet, floral, spicy, or grassy smells; an underground scavenger hunt to encourage soil play; or a hunt for sun and shade in the garden to tap the interoceptive sense. Facilitators may direct children to look for plants that match descriptions or color/texture swatches, hide small objects among the plants, or keep prompts open ended.

Sensory Trails and Sensory Walks: Sensory trails and sensory walks provide external sensory experiences while activating the proprioceptive and vestibular senses as children navigate them. The activity may be a determined texture-rich pathway that includes quadrants of crushed stone, mulch, pebbles, and mud, or it can refer to a walk that guides children to tune in or remove a particular physical sense. Variations include a listening walk, a blindfolded walk, a noise canceling walk, a texture walk for hands or feet, or a pathway overflowing with plants of different textures that contact the legs.

Bouquets & Assemblages: Making bouquets for other people brings an element of empathy to the project and often motivates children who might otherwise refrain from tactile experiences. Beyond flowers to stimulate the sense of sight, bouquets may be themed to include herbs for scent, ferns or foliage for texture, rattling seed pods for hearing, or even fruit or vegetable kabobs for taste. Gathering the bouquet from the garden is an important part of the process, engaging the vestibular and proprioceptive senses.

Journaling: Journaling is one of the best ways to tap into interoception. “Sit Spot” (Young et al, 2016) is a technique that brings the participant to the same location repeatedly. Upon each session, the journalist may note the weather and internal sensations as well as what their external senses perceive. Varying the journal topics and materials maintains children’s interest; suggestions include responding with color to temperatures or sounds; using magnification tools to zoom in or out; imagining future life cycles; using chalkboards; drawing while blindfolded; or making texture rubbings.

**Related Activity Plans for Sensory Gardens
from the
[Therapeutic Horticulture Activity Database:](#)**

Scavenger Hunts:

Fleming, L. [Nature’s Colors Game](#)
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. [Game: Gathering Nature’s Treasures](#)
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. [Matching Game: Photos to Live Plants](#)

Sensory Trails and Walks:

Fleming, L., Carrol, K. [Lavender Labyrinth: Multi-Session, Multi-Group Installation](#)
Grimes, K. [Conflict Resolution Sensory Path](#)
Stivland, G. [Outdoor Obstacle Course: Swinging & Spinning](#)

Bouquets & Assemblages:

Fleming, L., O’Connor, E. [Flower Vase Bouquet: Hand-Held Method](#)
Fleming, L. [Foliage Bouquet](#)
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. [Sensory Bin](#)

Journaling:

Bethel, M., Fleming, L. [Don’t Pick the Flowers, Draw Them](#)
Stark, B. [Teenagers’ Field Guide](#)

Heavy Work & Play:

Grimes, K. [Watering Can Pass-Off](#)
Relf, D., Morgan, S. [Preparing Soil in Raised Beds](#)
Sherman, G. [Pounding Pansies](#)

Heavy Work & Play: Children need resistance not only to build muscle, but also to build awareness of how to flex or rest their muscles and nerves. Proprioceptive awareness is closely tied to self-regulation. Many deep work activities are inherent to gardening tasks, like digging and carrying water jugs, but infusing these activities with play and games helps to make gardening a joy. Playful options include “beat the clock” water jug races or relays; dedicated digging beds for imaginative play; stomping compost to a catchy beat or tune; and tests of superhero strength like safely lifting stones or pulling vines from fences.

Sensory gardens serve as powerful therapeutic spaces where intentional design meets meaningful activity to support the developmental, emotional, and sensory needs of children. By integrating therapeutic horticulture practices into thoughtfully designed environments, these gardens become vital tools for sensory integration, self-regulation, and inclusive learning. As demonstrated by successful models worldwide, sensory gardens hold significant potential for schools, healthcare settings, and community programs seeking to foster holistic child well-being. Continued investment in and research on these spaces can deepen our understanding of their impact, helping to ensure that every child has access to the healing and empowering experiences nature can provide.

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Upcoming Issue of *Cultivate* Winter 2026:
TH Therapeutic Goals: Social Domain

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