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Cultivating Healing

AHTA MAGAZINE

FEATURE STORY

Cultivating the Present Moment:

*Perspectives on Mindfulness
in Horticultural Therapy Practice*

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Plant meditation under a tree in Keralam, India.

PHOTO BY SATHISHKUMAR S.



Cultivating Laughter:

The Role of Humor in Horticultural Therapy

WRITTEN BY

Hsiang-Hua (Melanie) Chen HTR, MS and Libba Shortridge HTR, MLA

In horticultural therapy, we plan carefully. We select seeds, design activities, prepare soil, and imagine outcomes. And then the garden humbles us—in the best possible way. One season, we proudly planted lettuce in a raised bed. Weeks later, alongside the neat green rows, a small tree appeared. The birds had their own planting agenda. When the group discovered it, someone declared, “We ordered salad, not a forest!” The laughter that followed was not a distraction from therapy—it was therapy. In that moment, the unexpected became a shared story rather than a mistake.

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Humor in the garden creates psychological safety. Plants rarely follow instructions perfectly, and neither do people. When a participant pulls up a twisted carrot that looks more like modern art than produce, we might hold it up and say, “This one has personality.” When a tomato plant flops dramatically over its stake, someone inevitably observes, “It’s having a Monday.” These playful interpretations reduce performance anxiety and normalize imperfection. Instead of seeing failure, participants begin to see variation, experimentation, and even character. Humor gently reframes frustration into curiosity.

For individuals experiencing depression, burnout, or cognitive decline, these small, shared jokes can interrupt heaviness. A quiet participant may suddenly engage when invited to name a particularly dramatic basil plant. One group voted to call their fastest-growing vine “Overachiever,” while the slowest seedling earned the affectionate title “Taking Its Time.” The garden becomes a stage for metaphors without feeling clinical. Through laughter, participants practice flexibility: not everything grows as planned, and that does not mean it is wrong. Sometimes the birds plant something unexpected—and sometimes that surprise becomes the highlight of the season.

From a therapeutic perspective, humor closely parallels many of the mechanisms that make horticultural therapy effective. Both gardening and humor reduce stress, elevate mood, and strengthen social bonding. In horticultural therapy, participants gain physical engagement, sensory stimulation, connection with nature, and opportunities for communication and meaning making. Humor adds another layer: it brings levity, stimulates mental agility, and helps build trust within the group. Together, these overlapping benefits support creativity, insight, and emotional resilience.

Within group sessions, humor can strengthen the therapeutic alliance by

lowering social barriers and fostering shared experiences. It loosens rigid thinking patterns and invites new perspectives— an “aha” moment. Humor opens space for curiosity, encourages ingenuity in responding to unexpected outcomes, and allows both therapists and participants to show up more authentically. When humor is welcomed in the garden, the therapeutic environment becomes more open, creative, and genuinely human.

For Hsiang-Hua (Melanie) Chen, in her experience as a horticultural therapist, humor is not simply something that happens during sessions—it is also a mindset that practitioners can cultivate within themselves. There are days when

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The butterfly opts for a selfie and brings a humorous shift in the lesson plan.
PHOTO BY LIBBA SHORTRIDGE



(From Previous Page) The carrot and the boy both have their own personality. Humor opens perspectives, reminding us that what looks like a limitation can sometimes become a strength. A carrot harvested from an elementary school garden in Taipei City.
PHOTO BY HSIANG-HUA CHEN



Let's cheer for the vine that is "taking its time," and hope the "overachiever" will grow far enough to meet it on the other side. The honeysuckle grows in a therapeutic garden for those with special needs in New Taipei City.

PHOTO BY HSIANG-HUA CHEN

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programs feel challenging, when participants are disengaged, or when we ourselves feel tired and discouraged. On those days, the ability to see the situation through a humorous lens can be surprisingly restorative. Humor does not erase difficulty, but it softens the edges. For therapists, this perspective can help sustain emotional resilience and maintain authenticity. When horticultural therapists allow themselves to respond with curiosity, playfulness, and genuine amusement, they model a way of relating to imperfection that participants can also adopt.

Libba Shortridge, a retired horticultural therapist, reflects on the dance of a horticultural therapist with nature as one's partner, constantly pivoting in delightful ways through humorous lens. "Always be open to inspiration and humor" is her mantra. The greatest source of inspiration is the interns she has worked with over the years. "Humor is a gateway to awe," she learned from Jennifer Kampf HTR, LGSW, who practices Walk and Talk therapy on the Osaugie Trail that skirts the shoreline of Lake Superior.

Chen and Shortridge ("from opposite ends of the world, and seeing through the same lens," they joke) explored with other colleagues how humor speeds up and facilitates openness, ingenuity, and genuineness. "Humor is so important in letting in joy," Genevieve Layman HTR, MA, APC writes, "and has a way of creating cohesion and harmony in group quickly, and with a level of trust and intimacy that is often surprising and joyful to witness."

When we allow space for laughter—about muddy shoes, curious butterflies, rebellious radishes, or mystery seedlings—we cultivate openness. As horticultural therapists, we are not only growing plants. We are growing the capacity to adapt, to connect, and occasionally, to laugh when the birds redesign our treatment plan.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hsiang-Hua (Melanie) Chen HTR, MS, is a horticultural therapist (HTR with Taiwan Horticultural Therapy Association) with a background in psychology and neuroscience. She views humans not as separate from nature, but as a living part connected to the Earth. Her work integrates scientific understanding of the mind and brain with the restorative and healing power of horticulture and gardens. Through her collaboration with Shortridge, she has also been inspired by the sparks of humor that emerge in shared moments.

Libba Shortridge HTR, MLA, is dedicated to sharing her knowledge and passion with others. In her retirement from practice at Skyland Trail in Atlanta, she serves as a visiting lecturer for the Horticultural Therapy Institute. Her recent invitation to lecture and tour in Taiwan offered an opportunity to connect and collaborate with Chen, and to reunite with Dr. Man-Li Liao, who interned with her in 2016.



Stewardship and Sustainability as an Ethical Responsibility in the Practice of Horticultural Therapy

WRITTEN BY
Anni Jack

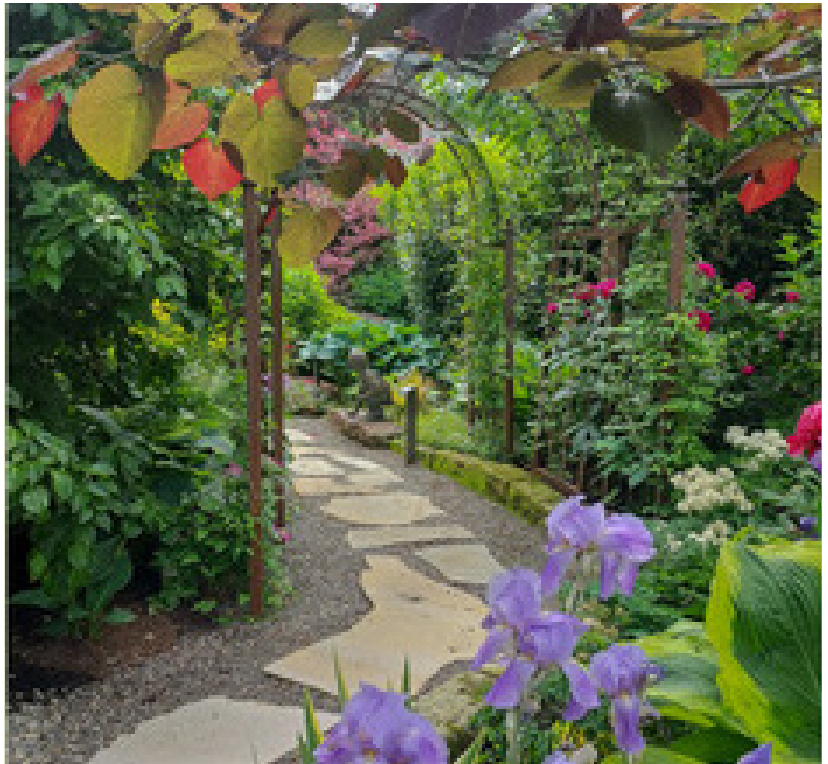
"If we do not plant knowledge when young, it will give us no shade when we are old."

-Lord Chesterfield

The practice of horticultural therapy (HT) relies on the use of plants to meet the therapeutic needs of the client. The use and mere presence of plants can offer a multitude of diverse benefits (Hamal, 2025).

- Plants connect us socially. They can be community builders and cultural connectors. Plants are tangible elements that are relatable to the entire world!
- Plants have spiritual benefits that offer deeper meaning to one's own life as well as a connection to the past.
- Plants are a creative medium that can be used to increase artistic expression and imagination.
- Plants can be a tool for increased physical health. Plant-centered activities can offer opportunities for balance, coordination, and fine and gross motor skill building.
- Plants have an array of mental health benefits. They are mood improvers, anxiety reducers, and self-esteem builders.
- Plants foster nature connectedness. They are living metaphors for healing and growth in human life. Naturally, this connectedness fosters care for the botanical world (Richardson, Butler, 2022).

The aforementioned 'nature connectedness' is a recognition of the symbiotic relationship evident between humans and plants in horticultural therapy practices (Bruzzichese, 2025). Within the context of the location, a sense of place is deepened and with that, a sense of responsibility and stewardship grows. Botanical tasks, such as irrigation, lead to respect of water, planting



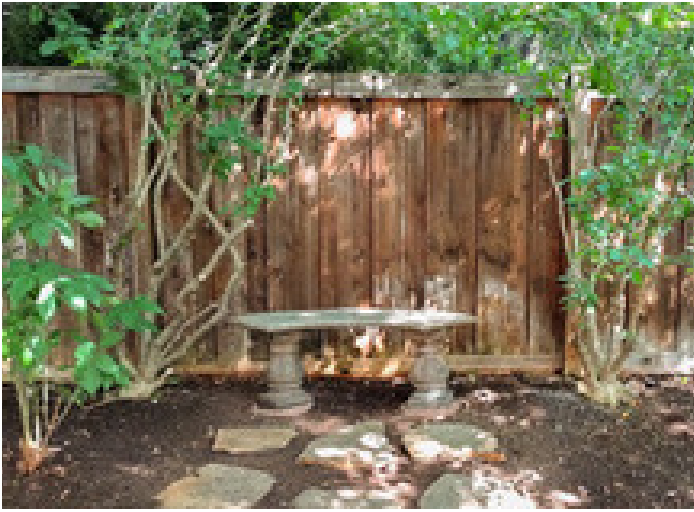
Boise River garden space
PHOTO BY ANNI FRANK

encourages the development of healthier soil, and harvesting can translate to replenishing resources and less wastefulness; these core gardening tasks can then translate to a deeper meaning for the individual. This environmental stewardship can lead to inspiration, contagious passion, and a desire to broaden ecological connectedness. Solastalgia, ecological anxiety for negative environmental changes, can be reduced by intentionality and a sense of purpose (Sustainability Directory, 2025). Permaculture, sustainable habitats that work with nature, become part of this natural ecological progression furthering a stewardship and sustainability movement which can originate from a local horticultural therapy program!

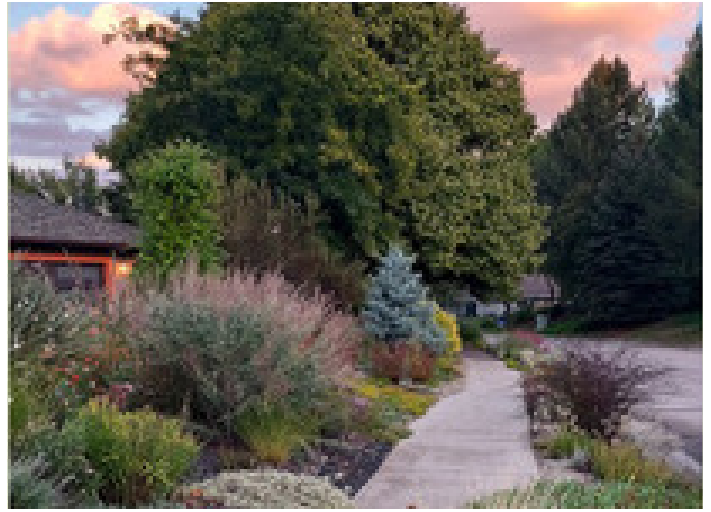
"How did we go from being a part of this greater earthbody to feeling apart from her? And how might we practice belonging ourselves back to the ecosystem?"

- Toko-Pa Turner of The Center for Humans & Nature

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A shady respite.
PHOTO BY ANNI JACK



A low water garden space in the high desert.
PHOTO BY ANNI JACK

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Currently, the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) does not recognize stewardship and sustainability as an ethical responsibility in the practice of horticultural therapy. Why should this change? Though there is a natural reciprocity in HT between humans and the botanical world, environmental principles and associated actions are not inherent and must be taught. Horticultural therapy centers its practice around plants because they offer so many powerful and beautiful benefits as mentioned above – shouldn't we treat those precious, finite resources with ethical respect?

How can we, those specifically involved in HT practices, implement stewardship and sustainability principles? The Sustainability Directory references therapeutic gardening and HT activities that marry with sustainable stewardship.

- Resourcefulness is a sustainable attribute within horticultural therapy. The ingenuity that HT practitioners employ with clients is already a reflection of this ethical quality, such as PVC pipes used as supports and for seed planting, kitchen tools used in digging and fine motor skill building, and creative projects from naturally found materials.
- Conservation is practiced with effective watering techniques as well as collection and planting of seeds.

The Missouri Botanical Garden offers an array of sustainable gardening practices in relation to lawns and gardens (Missouri Botanical Garden, n.d.) including:

- Manual activities, such as weeding, that don't emit exhaust

- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices
- Turning yard waste into nutrient-rich compost
- Reusing pots and other materials
- Bioregional planting and landscape principles (planting appropriately for the locale)

I implore the AHTA and similar organizations that utilize plants in therapy practices to officially recognize and include stewardship & sustainability practices within their code of ethics and further educate practitioners as well as clients regarding these concepts and strategies to implement within HT programming.



**"If what I say
resonates with
you, it is merely
because we are
both branches on
the same tree."**

-W.B. Yeats

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We are always looking for fresh voices to be heard in the AHTA Magazine so send us your stories by submitting them [here](#).

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