How to start a Garden Club for Seniors

For seniors living in nursing homes, the benefits of garden related activities are abounding. Many nursing homes now provide specially designed ‘memory gardens’ and ‘wander gardens’ for residents living with dementia.

Recreation staff can provide outdoor or indoor garden activities in a supporting and caring atmosphere via an engaging Garden Club program.

Benefits of Gardening Activities in Nursing Homes

- Positive social entertainment
- Reminiscing opportunities
- Enhanced well-being
- Improved dexterity
- Reduced symptoms of depression.
- Educational opportunities
- Relaxation and satisfaction
How to Start a Garden Club for Seniors:

You will need:

- An outdoor area (cemented or tiled for easy cleaning), free of sound distractions such as noisy TV’s and people talking.
- A couple of large tables covered with plastic or old newspapers.
- Some tools, seedlings, plant cuttings, potting mixture, plastic pots, a bag of sand, and a water hose close by.
- A group of enthusiastic residents.

Preparation:

- Inform management of your intentions and ask for support; financial and otherwise.
- Line up a volunteer or two to assist you.
- Plan at least three sessions in advance. Be aware that your plan is dependent on the weather. Prepare to change activities if the session is to be conducted indoors.
- Buy gardening tools suitable to your clients such as long handled hand-rakes, lightweight shovels, safety secateurs (pruners), garden gloves, and trowels.
- Advise residents of your plans via the scheduled ‘Residents Meeting’ for expressions of interest. Recruit six to eight people to start with.
- The group should meet once a month or once a fortnight.
- Raised garden beds are highly recommended if possible.

Ideas for Garden Club Activities:

In the absence of a Horticultural Therapist, request advice from your local community garden club, they have the expertise and panache you need and in my experience they are always willing to help.
Good weather Garden Activities:

Use an outdoor area to enjoy fresh air and the sights and sounds of nature.

Outdoor activities to enjoy include:

- Planting seedlings of cherry tomatoes in pots
  Related: [Horticultural Therapy Activities](#)
- Propagation by cuttings
  Related: [Outdoor Gardening Activities](#)
- Planting herbs in raised beds or in pots
- Planting flowers, whatever is in season, e.g.:
  - Calendula and Chrysanthemum – Northern Hemisphere
  - Lilies, and Geraniums – Southern Hemisphere
- Re-potting plants
- Planting vegetables that are in-season
- Tidying up pot plants
  Related: [Pruning Activities](#)
- Propagating succulents
- Making Terrariums
  Related: [How to Create a Desert Terrarium](#)

I once sat a client, who could not communicate at all, in front of an old pot of fern with just a few green leaves in the middle, and a mass of dead leaves around it.

I asked her if she could tidy-up the plant for me and placed a pair of safety scissors within her reach. She looked at it for 15 minutes before she proceeded to pick up the scissors and slowly cut the dead leaves away one by one.

We were amazed at the transformation in her demeanor; from expressionless to alert in 25 minutes and smiles when we praised her. This is the sort of outcome that makes our jobs so worthwhile.

Bad weather Garden Activities:

If the weather turns cold or windy, conduct your meeting indoors.

Here are a few ideas:

- Spanish moss bundles – It is hard to find Spanish Moss to buy, and when you do it can be rather expensive; try asking residents’ relatives to bring some from home. Each resident can make a small bundle for the outside wall of their bedrooms or hang on a tree or indoor plant.
- Potpourri Sachets – Make sachets for wardrobes or drawers with natural fragrant plants, herbs and flowers.

- Planting Indoors Bulbs – Spring bulbs are easy to grow and guarantee flowers every time. Plant beautiful hyacinth, narcissus and amaryllis bulbs and place on window sills or other sunny areas.

**Tips & Instructions:**

1. If planting bulbs, purchase them from a reputable nursery.
   - You will need glass containers (any size) and small pebbles.
   - Place pebbles inside a container and arrange a few bulbs, (or just one bulb if the container is small) root side down, so that the pebbles cover half of the bulbs.
   - Finally, put a minimum amount of water in the container, just enough to touch the root of the bulbs.
   - Watch it grow!

2. Geraniums, also known as Pelargoniums are almost fail-proof plants; fragrant and beautiful. Ask residents' relatives for cuttings and trim them for planting as follows:
   - Cut below growth nodule;
   - Take leaves and flower buds out leaving only the smallest leaves attached.
   - Dip ends in honey and place in potting mixture.
   - Water pots once a week.

3. If making Spanish moss hangings, be careful when gathering the strands to tie them; if the strands are hung upside down, they won’t thrive.
Strands may be cut with scissors and then tied with a rubber band or kitchen string (do not use metal of any kind such as a florist wire or metal twist-tie).

Tie the little bundle (using string) to a stick or bamboo or recycled chopstick.

Before hanging it on a tree or wall, submerge the bundle in tap water or rain water and soak well.

In the hot summer months use a spray bottle to water once a week.

4. If making Potpourri, buy the sachets ready-made or buy some satin fabric and ask someone to sew the sachets for you. Buy the dried herbs and flowers; then mix them up to your liking in a large container. Fill sachets and tie with pretty ribbons.

5. Buy the best potting mixture you can afford, you will get you money back in yield.

6. Ask relatives of residents to bring in cuttings of succulents for a gardening session. Mix potting mixture with sand or gravel for vigorous growth. Succulents are very versatile, you can make hanging pots, wreaths and feature pot plants. The variety is enormous and so are the colours; well worth your effort. Place them in partly shaded spots and water only when dried.

7. People with poor dexterity can work in pairs; one holds the pot and another fills the pot with potting mixture; place potting mixture on a chair between them.

Good Luck!

Related:

- How to Create a Backyard Bird Habitat
- Weather Station Activities for Seniors
- Sensory Stimulation with Wind Chimes

What garden activities have you found to work well with seniors?