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## Extension Master Gardeners: Helping the Homeless to Heal

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## Extension Master Gardeners: Helping the Homeless to Heal

### Abstract

Families with children are the fastest-growing sector of the homeless population. Loss of one's home, the conditions of shelter life, and the physical and sexual abuse that often precipitates homelessness result in psychological trauma and a diminished sense of self-efficacy and self-worth. This article describes the effects of participation in gardening activities led by Extension Master Gardeners on homeless women with children. Results show Master Gardeners can play an important role in helping homeless families mitigate the psychological trauma associated with homelessness and help homeless individuals develop a restored sense of dignity.

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## Introduction

"My kids and I enjoy the garden because it gives us a chance to do things together and spend time doing stuff that we enjoy."

"I feel the garden is a beneficial aspect of the community. I look forward to being able to attend with your group."

These comments from homeless women with children highlight benefits of their participation in an innovative program developed by the Palm Beach County Extension Master Gardeners at a homeless shelter. Residents learned how to grow vegetables, herbs, fruit trees, and ornamental plants; how to harvest the crops; and how to cook with them.

There are at least 727,304 homeless people nationwide; families with children comprise 40% of this population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004). Most homeless families are headed by single females and reside in homeless shelters rather than on the streets (Haber & Toro, 2004). Loss of one's home, conditions of shelter life, and the physical abuse that often precipitates homelessness result in psychological trauma (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991). A core element of such trauma is a diminished sense of self-efficacy and self-worth (Figley & McCubbin, 1983; Walker, 1978). Homeless adults with low self-efficacy are more likely to remain in shelters, whereas individuals with high self-efficacy more actively pursue employment and housing and remain at shelters for a shorter duration (Epel, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 1999).

Some studies (e.g., Hoffman, Trepagnier, Thompson, & Cruz, 2003; Myers, 1998; Zimmerman, 2000) suggest participation in gardening has positive effects on self-esteem and self-efficacy. "An increase in positive feelings about oneself" (Miller & Keys, 2001, p. 349) promotes a sense of dignity among homeless individuals. Participation in gardening has positive effects on psychological well-being (Gauvin & Spence, 1996). It also improves memory and concentration, reduces stress and anger, teaches responsibility, eases emotional pain due to bereavement or abuse, encourages social interaction, cultivates nurturing feelings, and enhances productivity and

problem solving (Worden, Frohne, & Sullivan, 2004).

## Method

Residents worked in the shelter's community garden under the guidance of Palm Beach County Master Gardeners. The Master Gardeners conducted 12 weekly hour-long sessions at the shelter. Specific projects and class content included mulching, composting, fertilizing, soil testing, irrigation, planting techniques, pruning, integrated pest management, citrus care and management, palm care and fertilization, and butterfly gardening.

A special feature of the garden was the pizza wheel shown in Figure 1. A pizza wheel is a decorative way to grow herbs and vegetables and a great way to show children how to grow plants that might be found on a pizza, such as basil, onions, peppers, tomatoes, parsley, and oregano.

**Figure 1**

A Pizza Wheel Demonstrating Various Plants That Can Be found on Pizza



## Results

Many shelter residents talked about their positive experiences of participating in the gardening program. Jeanne said although she didn't get to spend much time in the garden, "the times I did spend there were meaningful and peaceful." Frances was not able to attend much due to her school schedule but said, "I fully enjoy growing and tending to plants . . . and look forward to being able to attend in the future." Rita felt working in the garden "just gives you that relaxed, satisfying feeling." Katrina said, "I feel good about doing this activity with my child. I feel it also creates the quality of patience and there is an anticipation of things to come." Shelter residents also enjoyed working in the garden at times other than the regular Master Gardener education sessions and the benefits of having homegrown produce to eat.

## Conclusions

This project highlights the importance of horticultural programs as a means to mitigate psychological trauma associated with homelessness and help homeless individuals develop a restored sense of dignity. Based upon this experience, we believe that Extension Master Gardeners can play an important role in helping homeless families by instituting community gardening programs at other homeless shelters. Such programs can provide meaningful leisure activities that encourage self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-sufficiency among residents of homeless shelters and lend support to their efforts to escape from homelessness.

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