

The Resurrection of a Secret Garden.

Tucked in behind an adult day care facility and enclosed by walls, a secret garden silently endured the pandemic. What was once a thriving part of the UVM Health Network-Home Health & Hospice now was overgrown with weeds and some badly neglected trees. Due to the pandemic the Adult Day Program was shuttered for over a year. The UVM master gardener volunteers were not allowed on site, and this had left its mark on the Secret Garden. Some of you may remember *this particular* Secret Garden. It was featured on the 2017 AHTA Conference Garden Tour that took place in Burlington, Vermont.



Over a decade ago, Donna Covais HTR, along with other community members and a team of master gardener volunteers created a garden for clients with memory loss. The garden space is enclosed which allowed clients to explore outdoors in a safe and defined area. Donna skillfully delivered horticultural therapy sessions to clients by engaging their senses and was able to bring out memories, stories, jokes and even song from her participants. There were benches in shaded areas for a place to rest, colorful annuals, perennials, vegetables, and herbs were grown in both raised and in-ground beds. The on-site cook would harvest the vegetables and herbs to enhance the lunch menu, which engendered a sense of ownership and pride among the clients. Each year a Garden Party Luncheon was held and enjoyed by clients and staff alike. By all accounts, the Secret Garden was a happy and cherished place.



This past May, after more than a year of despair, master gardener volunteers, Robilee Smith and Jennifer Trapani, along with a team of dedicated Master Gardener Volunteers, began the herculean task of bringing the Secret Garden back into order. Upon entering the garden, they found, invasive plants, trees that were dying, and A LOT of weeds. Work sessions occurred once to twice weekly for intensive weeding, adding new soil, compost, plants, and mulch. A dying tree was removed which created a sunny area that was once shaded, causing a change in the original garden design.

There have been many bright spots in the renovation process. Robilee and Jennifer found some “old friends” still thriving in the overgrown garden. Japanese anemone put on a “fine spring display” and a huge lavender plant has been in continuous bloom all summer long. A shining example of how plants teach us resiliency in the face of despair. In the space where the tree was removed, two new raised beds were placed, and vegetables are now thriving. The MGV team divided some of the shade perennials and moved them to a location in front of the building where they now greet everyone who enters. Community members also helped with generous donations of soil, perennials, and annuals.

The renovation process took two months to complete. Robilee and Jennifer are happy to report that “we are now in a normal maintenance mode”. Even though COVID restrictions continue to limit use of the

garden space, clients enjoy short periods of outdoor time and were able to witness the renovation from windows. Staff members have found the garden to be a pleasant “conference room” and use it for mask-less breaks. Restrictions have delayed the return of regular HT sessions. This restriction did give the MGV’s much needed time to “re-think the garden design and make more significant changes”. As far as what the future holds, Robilee and Jennifer are exploring grant opportunities that would help fund projects to expand the therapeutic components of the garden and create more intentional time for clients to explore and experience the garden therapeutically. They would also love to do more community outreach that would sustain and bring attention to the garden in years to come.



This article written by Colleen Griffin HTR, originally appeared in the September 2021 NEHTN newsletter.

