

THERAPEUTIC HORTICULTURE

with

Leah Deihl

By Hannah Shellenback
and Valeria Morell



Elizabeth (Leah) R.M. Deihl works in Environmental Horticulture as the Director of Therapeutic Horticulture at University of Florida's Wilmot Gardens. Deihl does research and programming, and focuses on the education and connection of people with nature, specifically people with mental health issues and elders. "We work with a group with people who have autism and when we are in the greenhouse it's a much more calm place and when we walk into a green place it's relaxing for many groups", Deihl says. The environment in the greenhouse helps people feel tranquility and at peace.

Therapeutic Horticulture is the practice of gardening and plant-based activities, facilitated by a licensed therapist, that help achieve therapeutic treatment goals. Deihl's collection of research concludes that the practice of therapeutic horticulture has shown to significantly benefit the mental and physical health of humans. Research in the past 15 to 20 years shows that being in nature reduces blood pressure and lowers heart rate, in addition to improving one's mood.

Deihl hadn't always known she wanted to work in environmental horticulture. Over 20 years ago, She had graduated from University of Illinois-Chicago with bachelor's degrees in both architecture and art history. Her brother had a traumatic brain injury and had developmental disabilities from it. She says her education and her brother's situation came together and by the end of grad school, she was discovering the connection of plants and people with disabilities to help her brother and other people who had disabilities like him.

When Deihl first came to University of Florida, she was a volunteer at Wilmot Gardens. The director asked her to start working part time doing therapeutic horticulture with veterans who have mental illness. They were originally borrowing space from the horticulture department. Within a year, a gentleman

granted the gardens \$500,000 to build the greenhouse that she uses for therapeutic horticulture today. She was able to open the program to help different groups of people like elders, and people with other mental illnesses. The greenhouse is built to be fully accessible to those who are physically and mentally challenged.

**"THERE IS A REAL CONNECTION
BETWEEN NATURE AND OUR HEALTH,
AND HOW TO HARNESS IT IS REALLY
IMPORTANT"**



Right now, Deihl does not have an extension appointment and is not responsible for an extension program however, she considers her work at the greenhouse an extension program because she works with patients from outside of the University, and Wilmot Gardens also offers a lot of outreach programs.

Deihl believes that everyone, impaired or not, connects to nature and plants in some way. Her work all across the US has helped people to improve their motor skills, communication, and given them an overall feeling of belonging in society. Her many awards and accomplishments show that her work is very important to the world of horticulture and people-plant connections.