



The Gardens at Idylwood: "Harvesting Health"

Tanya Ahern

Idylwood Care Center is a skilled nursing facility with extraordinary approach to resident care. Interested residents perform their physical and occupational therapies outdoors in the 17,000 square foot vegetable and flower gardens. Franco Diamond, Administrator, explains, "When people are outside, their moods truly improve. We strive



to give them outdoor activities in which they feel useful. When they have purpose, they have a reason to get up in the morning."

The story of how the gardens evolved starts with a 91 year-old resident at Idylwood, Mrs. C. Mrs. C.'s health was declining and she refused to eat; the staff held care conferences to determine how to encourage Mrs. C to thrive.

Mrs. C. and her fava beans



Sandy, the staff Dietician, asked Mrs. C. what type of food she enjoyed. Mrs. C. replied that she wanted to eat more foods from her native country of Italy. Specifically, she wanted fava beans.

Sandy talked to her kitchen team but her staff had never prepared fava beans. Then someone suggested that they grow the beans. In a small planter box outside of Mrs. C.'s window the beans were planted. She watched the beans mature quickly and she indicated when they were

ready to harvest. The staff then had the beans but they were puzzled about how to cook them. They coaxed Mrs. C. out of her bed and into the kitchen to help prepare the beans.

"It's a pretty extensive process to prepare the beans," says Franco. "You need to shell them, blanch them, shell them again and then cook them. We didn't know any of that... but Mrs. C. did. She hadn't left her bed in weeks but she got



out of bed to help the staff prepare her beans. She was happy to be contributing something again."

"We were so amazed at her transformation that we decided to plant some other crops," says Franco. "We cleared out some land that was just growing weeds and the residents became active in planting seeds and watering the crops. We then realized that this activity was providing physical therapy for our residents."

Idylwood now grows 30 varieties of fruits and vegetables and dozens of flowers. Interested residents participate (to the best of their abilities) in

Sandy, Idylwood's Dietician, and Elva (a resident) in the gardens



planting, harvesting and washing the produce to be used in the cooking groups. "It's so enjoyable to get out of the building and in the garden," says Ms. S., an Idylwood resident, "I like to have quiet time to myself."

"It reminds the residents of the Victory Gardens they grew to support the war effort during World War Two," says Diamond.

Residents can watch their plants start from seedlings and grow into a food item that they can share with their friends at a communal table.

"It's always great to get out in the garden and see something that I have grown," says resident Mr. M.

Mrs. C. was so inspired after cooking the fava beans that she then taught the staff how to prepare other Italian dishes and from that the culinary program was created at Idylwood. "This is a tremendous change in the culture of nursing homes," says Franco. "Oftentimes, we rely on overly processed or canned foods simply because it's the way it has always been done. The staff challenged that notion and the residents reap the benefit."

The first activity in the culinary program was "The Soup of the Day" where residents and staff submitted soup recipes for preparation in the kitchen. "We held taste competitions and performed cooking demonstrations on how to cook the various soups," says Dietician Sandy. Residents help prep the vegetables, blend and puree ingredients and add various seasonings. "The delicious smell of fresh homemade soup really draws residents out of their rooms," says Franco. "It's a great way to keep people active, involved and well-nourished."



The Soup of the Day program inspired various other cooking group activities and a full-time chef was hired to lead the groups. The chef shows the residents step-by-step how foods are prepared just like on a televised cooking program that you may

watch on the Food Network. When the demonstration is over, residents

are invited to eat the food that they assisted in preparing. Residents also submitted recipes to the chef for the Idylwood cookbook and those foods are often prepared as meals for the entire resident population.

"Because we are in the Bay Area, our residents represent many different cultures," says Franco. "We strive to be inclusive with foods that not only remind them of home but also meet religious requirements for their diets."

The Horticultural and Cooking Group Programs work in tandem when foods from the garden are used in the cooking groups. "It gives the residents such a sense of pride to use the foods that they grew," says Sandy. "The fresh fruits and veggies also provide important nutrients and aid in digestion. When residents eat fiber-rich foods, they can often cut down on bowel regularity medications, too."

Overall, the program has been a tremendous success. Residents are more active both indoors and out and families are thrilled to see their loved-one participating and engaged in activities. From a simple fava bean, a food revolution has sprouted at Idylwood!

If you would like to help us with our gardens, we can use everything from seeds to outdoor benches and planter boxes. We also need assistance with clearing out areas for future planting and the building of planter boxes. Thank you!

For more information about Idylwood Care Center go to:

<http://www.crestwoodbehavioralhealth.com/sunnyvale.html>

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