



Roots of Therapeutic Gardening

by Kent County Master Gardener, Faith Loper

How awesome is nature's colorful pallet of bursting blossoms. Her rainbow of flowers vibrantly accenting life's monochromatic green backdrop. Nature splendidly nurtures, renews and brings peace to the soul.

Kelly, my young daughter, enjoyed a unique connection with the beauty and rejuvenating properties of nature. Her innocent young mind theorized that bad dreams and even a terminal condition



Faith Loper Master Gardener Photo

African Violets year round flowering house plants.

garden that has absorbed our tears and provided a home for acceptance. Kelly's therapeutic garden and house plants are still of great assistance.

could be trapped in the foliage of plants.

Unfortunately, her story did not have a happy ending. My fellow gardener and I celebrated the joys and pains of life, always together.

During her last months and days, we talked flowers and laughed at pain and tended our forever yard garden.

Realizing that only nature is eternal, we created a mini memorial

The Beauty of Nature in Your Home

The **African Violet** (*Saintpaulia*) is a striking flowering houseplant which has many varieties. They flower year-round under the right growing conditions, and flourish in an area with filtered light of low intensity.

Use the right soil mix (preferably a mix that is peat-based with 50 percent perlite) because their fine roots do not like to be compacted. These plants do, however, like to be crowded in a pot. Their temperature preference is 65 to 80 degrees. Whenever the soil begins to lose its moistness, water with lukewarm water about once a week at the base of the plant.

Turn the flower pots weekly so each side gets an adequate amount of sun. Pinch off flowers and leaves that are faded, droopy or mushy. Keep your plant healthy by removing three or more bottom leaves every month. Use a fertilizer specified for African Violets.

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The Good Plant

Gardening offers many therapeutic benefits. Studies indicate that garden settings can significantly impact the recovery of patients with physical and emotional pain. Spending as little as an hour a day caring for plants tends to reduce stress, and calm troubled nerves. Boots on the ground and dirty hands has always been the way for us. So, when illness forced Kelly back home, she naturally rejoined our daily routine of plant watering, pot turning and spent blooms removal.

The Healing Garden

If we consider Mother Nature's stimulating to calming color splashes or absorbing green-greenery to be restorative, then we have found the "bones" of a therapeutic garden. Ideally, the basic



Faith Loper Master Gardener Photo

Fiddle-leaf fig may live up to 15 years as a house plant.

These healing flowers comforted my daughter and me during the darkest days.

features can include wide and gently graded accessible entrances and paths, raised planting beds and a sensory focus on color, texture, and fragrance. Our simplified memorial garden actually repurposed a part of the existing backyard garden. To some extent it has always existed. The offspring of some plants have been passed down two generations. They continue to bloom, heal and feed the soul.

Flowers We Commune With

As dawn chases the horizon above the neighboring horse farm, the cycle is again renewed. Heaven's golden light coats and reanimates our favorite plants.

Long Lasting Beauty

The Fiddle-Leaf Fig (*Ficus lyrata*) has longevity. It may live up to 15 years as an indoor plant before reaching maturity, and 25 to 50 years outdoors. I will always keep this plant around. My daughter Kelly saw its potential, even in its sickly state while located downstairs at basement level in our house. We nourished and placed it in more sunlight and it began to grow and become healthy again.

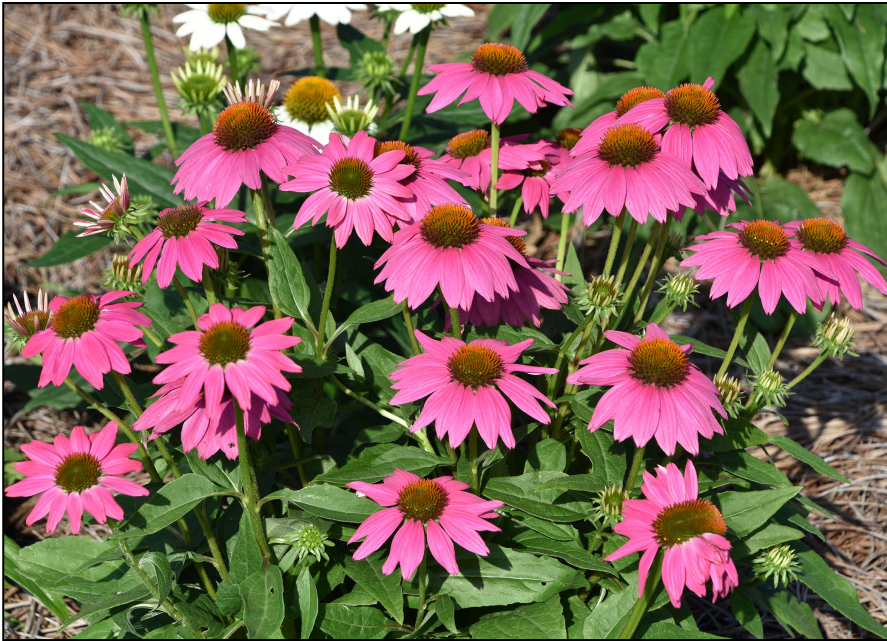
The popularity of this plant is credited to its big, floppy round leaves, that are shaped like a fiddle. This plant needs a lot of natural light and does best when placed in indirect light and some direct sun. Water to keep the soil moist but not soaking. When the top two inches of soil feels dry to the touch, it is time to water. Every few weeks rotate the pot position toward the light. This plant also absorbs toxins from the air.

When growing in a container, fertilize a handful of times a year. Renew the top several inches of soil with a fresh, nutrient-rich layer annually. Mulch will help to maintain moisture. The Fiddle-Leaf Fig prefers temperatures from 60 to 80 degrees.

Yard Beauty

The Daylily (*Hemerocallis*) may be among the most carefree of all flowering perennials. These low maintenance plants grow quickly and are long lived. They are adaptable and not fussy in a variety of soil conditions. This plant can live in sunny or partial shade, and is rarely troubled by insects or diseases. These colorful abundant flowers are dazzling. Depending on the type, some continue blooming until early fall.

When planting a daylily, loosen the soil to a depth of 12 “. Mix several handfuls of compost and some all-purpose granular fertilizer. Put the daylily in the hole so the crown of the plant is 1” below the soil line. Cover the roots with soil and water. Like most perennials they take a year or two to get established. Water new plants once or twice weekly for the first few weeks after planting. They appreciate being mulched with shredded bark or leaves and other organic materials.



Gary Bachman from Mississippi State University Extension Photo

Echinacea or Coneflower a perennial in the daisy family.

The Coneflower (*Echinacea*) is a tough perennial in the daisy family. They bloom in midsummer all the way through to fall frost. They are beloved by butterflies, bees and songbirds. Coneflowers are tolerant of drought, but do best in average, dry to medium moisture. They need at least an inch of water weekly. Coneflowers are striking when planted in masses, especially as a mix of various colors.

Dig a hole about twice the diameter of the pot. Set the plant so that the root ball is level with the soil surface. Fill in the top of the root ball. Space plants 1 to 3 feet apart, depending on size and maturity.

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Spreading thin layers of compost, followed by mulch helps keep plants moist and prevents weeds.

In late fall, lightly spread leaf mulch over the surface area. Cut the stems back to soil level when they wither or after frost. Divide or transplant coneflowers in spring or fall. Coneflowers self-seed prolifically, so where there was one, you will have many the next year.

Gardening beauty

Gardening brings the beauty of nature to your yard and home. It's a great way to relieve stress, set goals for yourself, and find peace and connectiveness. Horticultural therapy is a time-proven practice that has been helpful for generations. Gardening allows the practitioner to just exist in the moment. As we ponder the death of a loved one, we realize that the grief will never go away completely. However, the Therapeutic Garden helps to gently relieve some physical and emotional distress.

Words to Ponder – Poem by Countee Cullen entitled For My Grandmother. “This lovely flower fell to seed; work gently sun and rain; She held it as her dying creed; that she would grow again”.

References :

For My Grandmother, poem by Countee Cullen

NASA Plant Research Offers a Breath of Fresh Air.
(spinoff.nasa.gov)

National Institute of Health. “What is the Evidence to support the use of Therapeutic Gardens” (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

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Questions

For questions on this subject or any gardening topic call the Master Gardener Helpline: In New Castle County, (302) 831-8862; in Kent County, (302) 730-4000; and in Sussex County, (302) 856-2585 x 535. The Master Gardeners monitor the Helpline in the winter but it may take a few days to get back to you.



For more information about Master Gardener workshops, garden helplines, presentations, becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer, or other activities, please visit these websites.

UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website- <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>