



Raising Awareness of Horticultural Therapy with the Seed of “National Horticultural Therapy Week” and Roots of New Jersey Agriculture

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Promoting National Horticultural Therapy Week, held the third week of March since 2006, has been an AHTA ritual for more than ten years. In 2004 Lana Dreyfus, AHTA board member and President of the Chesapeake Chapter, campaigned for NHTW. Members of AHTA were encouraged to contact their elected Representative and Senators to request their support for this resolution. Congressman David Price, 4th District of North Carolina, sponsored Congressional Resolution Number 92 in March 2005 that supported the recognition of National Horticultural Therapy Week (NHTW) during 2006.

In 2012, I took Congressional Resolution Number 92 to New Jersey Senator Christopher “Kip” Bateman, R-District 16, (my legislative district). From there he shared it with the Office of Senate and Legislative Affairs to see if there was fertile ground to redraft. The ground was indeed fertile, and Senate Resolutions SJR12 and AJR13 were immediately supported by Senator Bateman and Assemblywoman Donna Simon, R-District 16, and introduced during the 2014/2015 Legislative Session. Meanwhile, the New Jersey Board of Agriculture had invited me to write a resolution for Horticultural Therapy week in preparation for vote at the 2013 Agricultural Convention in Atlantic City. The Convention annually assembles delegates from over 100 agricultural organizations, including Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, New Jersey Farm Bureau, and Vegetable Growers Association. Also present was the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association, which is comprised of over 400 member companies encompassing all facets of the nursery, greenhouse, landscape and retail garden center industries in New Jersey.

In regard to National Horticultural Therapy Week, the New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture shared, “New Jersey horticulture consistently ranks in the Top-10 states in terms of value and production. But like most sectors in New Jersey agriculture, gone are the days when the farmer just produced a crop and sold it without much thought to the end market. That’s all changing now, because the buying public wants more information about the grower, the product, and the application of that product, which brings a meaningful experience for the consumer. One example in New Jersey is the growing application of plant material for horticultural therapy. Not too many years ago, it was not something that many, other than the therapists themselves, gave much thought

to. Today, it is more widely understood and recognized by more people.”

Having written the Horticultural Therapy week resolution over the last four years, The State Board, along with the Senate and Assembly Joint Companion Bills, have added significance and merit to the subject of HT week. Additionally, many fields had to be rototilled: formal letters of support had to be written to legislative representatives and key leaders Senate President Stephen Sweeney, Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto, Senior Health and Human Services Committee Chairs for both the Senate and Assembly, and submitted by The State Board President, New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association Executive Director, American Society of Landscape Architects NJ Chapter President, then AHTA President MaryAnne McMillan, and MAHTN President, Sheila Major. The purpose of these letters was to request both Senate and Assembly Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee chairs to approve and “Post” SJR12 and AJR13 for Committee vote. I called and invited the Committee Chairs to visit programs in their own legislative backyards, including my own, as well as sent articles, over many months. MaryAnne McMillan and I had to testify before each Committee with Senator Bateman and Assemblywoman Simon. We had to garner bipartisan support with the each of the Committee Chairs, and do everything to get Senate President Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Prieto to post for Full Senate and Full Assembly vote. It was critical to get these Democratic chairs to co-sponsor SJR12 and AJR13 in order to have any hope in getting Senate and Assembly members on both side of the aisle throughout the State. As the two bills for NHTW progressed through the legislative fields in Trenton and around New Jersey, the AHTA was invited to provide a horticultural therapy display in March 2015. It was so successful we were asked back March 2016 and 2017.

Former New Jersey Assemblywoman Donna Simon (R-District 16) shared, “I was asked to contribute to this article as the Prime Sponsor of the New Jersey General Assembly Joint Resolution AJR13 designating the third week of March “Horticultural Therapy Week” in the State of New Jersey.

The process for a bill to become a law is not the only exercise in patience. What should be a light lift most often will be an arduous journey in politics. Sadly, and way too often, efforts are thwarted. Politics is not an easy

business and not for the fair-hearted. That being said, the trust, faith and honor to serve your constituency supersede politics. All potential issues or roadblocks must be met with diligence, persistence, tenacity, and the willingness to forge forward fostering relationships.

Laura DePrado, trailblazer and President of Final Touch Plantscaping approached me with the idea of designating the third week of March as Horticultural Therapy week. Horticultural Therapy touches so many, from children and adults with autism and other developmental diagnoses, PTSD, Alzheimer's Disease, chronic pediatric illnesses, depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, domestic violence victims, substance abuse, gross and fine motor skills, cancer, stroke, EDL skills, social skills, MVA, and more. Horticultural Therapy can and does touch everyone, whether emotionally, physically, or spiritually and has an enormous significance in everyday life. The bond between the client/participant and the therapist can be life altering.

My Chief of Staff, the Office of Legislative Services, the Assembly Republican Office, and Committee Aides began working diligently garnering support. I guided Ms. DePrado and her team on the process and joined forces by sending letters, making phone calls, having several meetings, lobbying both sides, giving testimony at the State House in front of the Senate and Assembly Committees, conversations with the majority party Democratic Chairs and Leadership, Republican and Democratic Committee members.

My partner in the Senate, Senator Kip Bateman mirrored efforts on the Senate side and with much appreciation, Governor Chris Christie signed our Joint Resolution into law on May 11, 2015. New Jersey is the first state in the nation to designate this. We were all so incredibly proud to be part of such a vital measure."

On May 11, 2015, Governor Christie signed into law SJR12/AJR13 "Horticultural Therapy Week" beginning in 2016 and every year thereafter. New Jersey is the first state in the nation to honor this. On March 14th, 2016, we attended Senate Ceremonial on the Senate Floor inaugurating NJHTW. The Assembly sent a Proclamation to me in the mail and the U.S. House of Representatives sent a Congressional Proclamation initiated by Congressman Leonard Lance. Congressman Lance who attended a special ceremony orchestrated by this author in August 2015 in celebration of 300 horticultural therapy sessions achieved with a senior.

This senior's life has been saved as a direct result of HT. Lance flew the flag over the U.S. Capitol on August 3rd, 2015 in honor of one of this senior client and citations were presented by Full Senate, Full Assembly, and Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders. In preparation for the Senate Ceremonial, MaryAnne McMillan and myself garnered the support of AHTA President Leigh Anne Starling on behalf of the AHTA, to prepare a formal statement upon the passing of SJR12/AJR13.

New Jersey Executive Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency, Paul Hlubik stated, "As a farmer and as the spouse of a horticulturalist, I recognize firsthand the healing power of working with one's hands in the soil and with plant life. As a public advocate for every segment of New Jersey agriculture through my work with growers and my colleagues in D.C. I commend such awareness and unyielding support of the Horticulture industry here in the Garden State."

Rob Swanekamp, Kube-Pak added, "In my career now of 43 years of growing Flowering plants, I have witnessed changes in the way our efforts have been viewed and used by the public. One constant throughout has been the power of a beautiful flower to amaze and delight gardeners." Kube-Pak is one of the top 10 plug (young plant) producers in the U.S. It is located in Allentown, New Jersey, specializes in growing bedding plants, hanging baskets and flowering containers, mums, and poinsettias for distribution to the Garden Center market, and landscapers throughout the North East. Kube-Pak is family owned and operated since 1963.

She states, "The process is the catalyst in HT that makes the "practice" so effective. Garden Centers are evolving away from a place where one would just purchase plants to transplant into gardens. Though this is still done, most of the Old School gardeners have left the scene. In order to remain viable businesses, garden centers adapt in different ways, and can become a place in the community where folks with abilities on the spectrum can come for gardening therapy. Therapeutic Horticulture can be involved in Gardening Education that is a form of therapy in itself. Gardening is a lifetime experience. I use gardening as my own escape from the pressure of production agriculture. I always encourage gardeners of all abilities to realize that we are stewards of our environment, and I don't know of any plot or garden that is ever truly finished. Like individuals,

gardens continue to evolve. They continue to change. They continue to grow. Horticultural Therapy does the same for those who need the service.”

In conclusion every state is different on how any policy/bill is chartered. The best first step in action in pursuing bill of “Horticultural Therapy Week” in your state is to go to the history of Bill SJR12/AJR13, and contact your local legislature either Senator, or Assemblyman and make an appointment. In addition parallel this step with identifying the leaders who can make a bill happen by their support (for example Department of Agriculture, farm bureau, horticulture society, landscape architecture (state chapter president), human services, and possibly others).

In recognition of Horticultural Therapy Week 2017 in the Garden State that runs from March 19th to 25th, a proclamation from Congressman Leonard Lance (R-7), resolutions from the New Jersey Senate and Assembly, and a proclamation from the Somerset County Freeholders were presented on the February 28th meeting of the Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

Senator Christopher “Kip” Bateman (R-District 16) said in a phone interview, “Designating a week each year to raise awareness of Horticultural Therapy is expanding opportunities for more people to take advantage of the many benefits it offers. Horticultural Therapy is a time proven practice dating back centuries that’s helped countless people from children to seniors to veterans to those with special needs. I hope this week in March will continue to be filled with many events highlighting the importance and value of horticultural therapy”

BIOGRAPHY

Laura DePrado, B.S., HTR holds a Bachelor of Science from the University of Northern Texas, Horticultural Therapy Certificate from Rutgers University, is a Registered Horticultural Therapist American Horticultural Therapy Association and President, Final Touch Plantscaping, LLC., specializing in connecting people and plants through customized activities and programs for children, young adults through seniors using plants year round in Adult Day, sub-acute, long term, rehabilitative and in-home care for groups and individuals to impact social, physical, and psychological well-being. She is a columnist/freelance writer for Gannett media outlets. Laura penned legislation designating the third week of March as "Horticultural Therapy Week," The first in the nation. Laura was just named by Leading Women Entrepreneurs in Business & Enterprise as Leading Woman Entrepreneur to be featured in NJ Monthly Magazine October 2017. She is the recipient of The Chairman's Award 2017 from NJ Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, the AHTA Alice Burlingame Humanitarian Award, the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association 2015 Distinguished Service Award, and nominated NJ Hero by Mary Pat Christie.

Laura is an appointed full member of the Somerset County NJ Board of Agriculture, a term of 4 years and is an appointed Alternate Delegate to the New Jersey Farm Bureau Convention. She is an appointed Trustee of the New Jersey Agricultural Society, and Committee member of the Agricultural Leadership Program.

