

## *Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program Elevating Well-being Through Therapeutic Gardening*

### **The Situation**

In 2022, Kansas had over 505,000 adults aged 65 and older, representing 17.2% of the state's population<sup>1</sup>. By 2064, the population of those aged 85 and older is projected to increase by 260%<sup>2</sup> to around 200,000 individuals. With approximately 1 in 4 older adults experiencing social isolation and loneliness<sup>3</sup>, the U.S. Surgeon General declared the lack of connection a public health crisis in 2023<sup>4</sup>. Participation in strategic plant-based activities, referred to as therapeutic horticulture<sup>5</sup>, has been shown to improve social and psychological well-being, as well as nutritional and physical health<sup>6</sup>. Such purpose-driven outreach through the Extension Master Gardener program provides valuable opportunities to enrich the quality of life for older adults in Kansas.

### **What We Did**

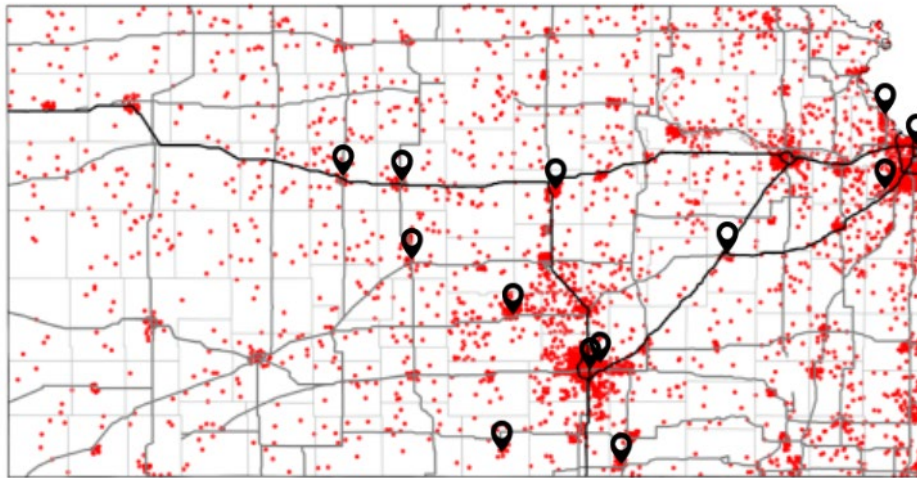
Kansas Extension Master Gardener (EMG) volunteers collaborate with long-term care and independent living facilities to create therapeutic gardens and guide plant-related activities designed to enhance residents' well-being. These on-site landscapes and gardens provide residents safe and convenient access to green spaces. Through regular interaction in the garden with each other and EMG volunteers, residents develop meaningful connections that alleviate social isolation and loneliness. These accessible gardening experiences promote physical activity, foster independence, engage memories, and build self-esteem.

EMG volunteers are also invited by senior centers, non-profit agencies, and other organizations supporting community-dwelling older adults to facilitate therapeutic horticulture activities. Participants engage in hands-on educational sessions covering topics and skills such as accessible gardening techniques, plant-centered arts and crafts, propagating houseplants, and cultivating herbs and vegetables. These activities incorporate therapeutic elements like sensory exploration, memory stimulation, connection with nature, creative expression, physical movement and coordination and social interaction<sup>7</sup>. Such rewarding experiences strengthen community ties and promote a healthier future for our valued older citizens.

Additionally, EMG volunteers maintain demonstration gardens across the state, both on Extension grounds and in local communities, showcasing features that make gardening more accessible and safer for older adults. These gardens incorporate raised beds, container gardens, wide pathways, comfortable seating, low-maintenance plant selections, and ergonomic tools<sup>8</sup>, all designed to enhance physical accessibility and ensure that older adults can continue to enjoy the therapeutic benefits of gardening with ease.

## Where Kansans Aged 85+ Live

Dot = 10 Older Kansans



Extension Master Gardener Therapeutic Horticulture Outreach  
*Where Kansas Aged 85+ Live, LeadingAge Kansas, 2024<sup>2</sup>*  
(This image does not represent all programming.)

### Outcomes

Kansans aged 50 and older benefited from **1,515** hours of therapeutic horticulture support made possible by the dedicated efforts of **53** trained Kansas Extension Master Gardener (EMG) volunteers.

- **6** long-term care and independent living facilities collaborated with their local Extension office and EMG volunteers to develop accessible garden spaces.
- **752** residents had safe and convenient access to green spaces on-site through **7** therapeutic gardens co-managed by residents, staff, and EMG volunteers.
- **975** hours of volunteer service was contributed to care facilities, the equivalent of **.47** full-time employees.
- **41** volunteers led therapeutic horticulture programs for older adults residing in long-term care and independent living facilities, as well as community-dwelling older adults.
- **46** educational programs and activities were made available for older adults through **15** community partnerships.
- **721** older adults in **10** counties engaged in therapeutic gardening activities to enhance their well-being.

### Success Story

Kansas Extension Master Gardener volunteers in Wyandotte and Johnson counties collaborate with assisted living communities to implement on-site horticultural therapy initiatives, enhancing residents' physical, mental and emotional well-being through gardening programs and activities. Since the inception of the Wyandotte County-Delaware Highlands Assisted Living partnership, residents have actively participated in planning, planting, and harvesting vegetable and flower gardens. Meanwhile, the Johnson County-Evergreen Community partnership allows residents to engage with food and flower gardens or simply appreciate their beauty from accessible pathways.

Both partnerships received international acclaim for their innovative horticultural therapy programs, recognized by the David Gibby International Search for Excellence Awards<sup>9</sup>.

### **Delaware Highlands Assisted Living**

“The Wyandotte County EMG’s have worked in partnership with Delaware Highlands Assisted Living Facility to create an accessible garden for residents. This has allowed residents to participate in horticulture therapy projects such as tomato and tulip planting, flower arts and crafts, and fresh fruits and vegetables to eat.”<sup>10</sup>



### [Delaware Highlands Assisted Living](#)

Awarded 1<sup>st</sup> in the Special Needs Audiences category<sup>9</sup>, 2023  
(A product of K-State Research and Extension<sup>11</sup>)

### **Evergreen Community**

“When [residents] come [to the garden], they’re choosing to come. As [Johnson County] EMGs, we help them to participate in the capturing of memories of their earlier lives and creating new experiences; finding peace by living in the moment. [...] We use enabling tools and individual attention to help residents participate in smaller actions enjoying edible and the physical beauty of the garden. We create together a peace and an opportunity to grow a better quality of life for the residents, their visiting families, the staff.”<sup>12</sup>



### [Evergreen Community](#)

Awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Special Needs Audiences category<sup>9</sup>, 2021



## References

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- <sup>3</sup> Social Isolation and Loneliness, World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>. Retrieved October 30, 2024.
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- <sup>5</sup> Definitions and Positions, American Horticultural Therapy Association. <https://www.ahta.org/ahta-definitions-and-positions>. Retrieved October 30, 2024.
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- <sup>10</sup> WyCo Extension Master Gardener Projects Earn International Recognition. <https://www.wycokck.org/Engage-With-Us/News-articles/Wyco-Extension-Master-Gardener-Award>. Published July 5, 2023.
- <sup>11</sup> 2023 Search for Excellence Award, Delaware Highlands Assisted Living. <https://youtu.be/dCVwWL4rLb4?feature=shared>. Published May 17, 2023.
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## Contact

**Annie Baker**

*State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator*

Kansas State University, Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources

785-370-6365

[abake@ksu.edu](mailto:abake@ksu.edu)

[www.ksre-learn.com/MasterGardener](http://www.ksre-learn.com/MasterGardener)

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