

Posted on Tue, Jul. 28, 2009

New garden brings new memories

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The Kansas City Star



Betty Lou Hinderks and a team of volunteers have transformed the memory garden at the Santa Marta Retirement Community in Olathe.

Susan Pfannmuller

A patchwork of hot pink, orange and yellow blossoms paint the ground. Small green trees glisten in the sun. A wooden bench sits at the end of the garden, cozy and inviting.

It has taken a year of hard work, but Betty Lou Hinderks managed to create a beautiful landscape at the Santa Marta Retirement Community.

The 83-year-old independent living resident has completely transformed the memory garden in the Alzheimer's Wing of Santa Marta's Health Services Center in Olathe.

She still recalls the day a health service administrator showed her the memory garden one year ago.

Motionless burning bushes stood side by side throughout the area. Lifeless roses limped in the shade.

Hinderks was stunned.

"I knew in my heart that I could make it beautiful," she said. "It appalled me that money had actually been spent on burning bushes. It was a really, really drab sight."

She quickly took action.

With the help of a few volunteers, she managed to plant flowers and clean up gnarly weeds last summer.

When winter came, she painted a watercolor of her ultimate vision for the memory garden. Impressed, administrators gave their whole-hearted approval of her project.

This spring, she was overwhelmed with Santa Marta residents who wanted to help out.

People donated plants, money, benches, decorations and, most importantly, their time.

"These volunteers sacrificed themselves for this garden, which was such a blessing," Hinderks said. "It is not easy to get down on your knees and plant at our age."

Working through rain and searing heat, the residents weeded, planted, and got to know each other.

When they were finished, bursts of color beamed back at them.

No burning bush was in sight.

When Hinderks saw the look on the healthcare residents' faces, it made all her hours of work even more worthwhile.

"This building is their entire world," she said. "I can't imagine how terrible it must be to only see the walls and halls of this place every day. It makes my heart happy that we created a place of beauty for them to enjoy."

Administrators and employees at the healthcare unit agree it has brought a lot more joy to the premises.

"What Betty Lou has done is glorious because it has opened our residents' world, which is narrow now," said Mari Ann Laricks, Health Services Senior Living Counselor. "The garden is so beautiful and has lifted their spirits."

The positive response delights Hinderks. Although it has not been a career, gardening has been an important part of her life.

She fondly remembers falling in love with gardening when she was 11 years old.

"My mom was busy working around the house and raising kids," said Hinderks, a Kansas City native. "So I became interested in gardening on my own. I loved to go out into the woods and bring rocks out of the ravine and decorate the side of our house with them."

She would also dig up plants from fields and put them near their house.

As a 19-year-old bride in 1945, she began sharpening her green thumb by planting gardens in every home she and her husband shared.

Many of her gardens throughout the past 64 years have been featured in garden tours and shows.

And although her 91-year-old husband, Ward, has never shared her passion for gardening, he has always been one of her biggest fans.

"My husband has always been very supportive of my skills because he knows what pleasure gardening has brought me," Hinderks said. "I never used prescription medication — gardening was my therapy."

When Hinderks and her husband, 30-year Overland Park residents, moved from their home in 2007 to Santa Marta's independent living quarters, she thought her days of tending a personal garden were over.

The memory garden has given her a chance to do what she loves once more. It also gave her the chance to make some close friends.

With all the weeding and cleaning and planting that is coming up this fall, Hinderks doesn't anticipate giving up gardening any time soon.

"Everyone here is so nice and it has been a tremendous joy to get to know these people and develop wonderful friendships," she said. "Hopefully, we will tend to this garden for as long as we can."