

Dish Gardens Her Way of Giving

By Lauren Wood

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Even without a green thumb, women at a local assisted-living center design masterpieces with plants.

Diana Flora, a professional naturalist, spends her Tuesday afternoons at Tanglewood Trace teaching residents about the environment through projects.

“This is really what I enjoy doing the most,” Flora said. “I always wanted to work in a retirement setting with elderly people.”

This Tuesday, Flora helped the women create dish gardens in holiday baskets. She used environmentally safe materials. These older people are the original recyclers, she said.

“My mother grew up in the depression and was conscious of everything. She washed paper plates to save money,” Flora said. “If it wasn’t for her influence, I wouldn’t be where I was today.”

Residents look forward to her visits and seeing what new idea she will bring each work. About 16 women gathered in the multi-purpose room for Flora’s activity. They were perched delicately in their chairs, some in wheelchairs, as they listened to their instructions.

“I’ve never arranged flowers or plants before, so it’s new to me,” said Elsie Sengelaub, 84. “It’s fun and it comes naturally to me.”

Sengelaub carefully arranged her plants with the tallest one toward the back of the basket with the smaller one up front. She followed Flora’s advice.

“It makes sense to do it this way,” she said. The tall one is so big it makes that two plants look good instead of three.”

Although most of the women had never designed a dish garden before, they remembered how they cared for plants in their homes.

“I used to buy plants in the store like poinsettias for the holidays,” Dorthea Barnes, 97. “But I really enjoyed designing the plants myself. I have just the right place for the basket too, on one of my end tables. It’ll sit so pretty.”

Dorothy Laurie, 82, lent a helping hand to her across-the-hall neighbor Barnes.

“I added the holiday decorations to be festive,” Laurie said. “When my plants at home got too big I’d go ahead and transplant them. I enjoyed that so I guess that’s why I’m so good at this.”

Some women are regulars at Flora’s activities. Irma Savoie, 67, attended Flora’s session once before when they made dish garden baskets.

“I never did any plant arranging before but it was interesting,” Savoie said. “I didn’t think my plant would grow but it did. I still have it and now and I really like it.”

Flora discusses plant care and watering habits with the women as part of her presentation. “I remembered what to do from last time,” said Savoie. “I was able to help the other ladies put their baskets together. It was a good time.”

Helping each other and socializing is another important aspect of Flora’s activities. She plans the activity before she arrives and makes sure to help any of the

women that need extra attention. Flora worked her way among the tables of women, offering water or tips about how to maintain the plants.

Mildred Galbraith enjoyed the activity because she like to get involved with other people in the center.

“You have to join in for something to do,” she said. “I had never arranged any plants before and just hoped mine turned out OK.”

Flora provided the women with an insight into plants that they may not have known. She draws on the knowledge from her education when talking to the women. Flora earned a bachelor’s degree in Natural Resources from Purdue University in 1987. She is certified as a Master Gardener which came after 15 years of personal and professional experience in the field. She considers a naturalist as someone who enjoys sharing nature.

“For me it’s really exciting that other people want to learn about something that I love,” Flora said. “It’s easy for me as a naturalist to share with others. It’s a joy.”

Working with nature gives people a peaceful feeling, Flora said.

“I want these women to know that same feeling, she said. “It really boosts morale.”

Gardening sometimes gives people the same sense of relaxation and connection.

“Working with plants releases tension,” Flora said. “I can see it in their faces.”

Working with the plants is another way to be in touch with nature and the self, she said.

Part of the enjoyment for me is creating nature with these people, Flora said. “I really love getting feedback from the women.”

After the women finished the project, they swarmed around Flora, complimenting and thanking her for spending time with them.

Flora’s dedication to groups at Tanglewood Trace will continue even after she gives birth. Her child is due January 1 but she hopes it will come sooner.

“I’ll bring my baby with me and I’ll continue to share my ideas,” Flora said. “This really does give serenity.”