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## When plants help to feed the spirit

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About six years ago, Melissa McLean of Freehold opened a landscaping firm -- Melissa's Lawn and Gardening Service -- specializing in small properties in retirement communities. "It was a great experience, and I still miss it," she said.

She gave up the business after only three years to care for her husband, who was terminally ill with cancer.

Still, gardening helped ground her during the hard times. When she was diagnosed 15 years ago with schizoaffective disorder, doctors predicted she would never work again.

McLean, 49, is now the full-time manager of the Self-Help Center in Freehold -- a peer-run, "drop-in" facility offering social and educational activities and employment assistance for people with mental disorders.

But she returned to rooting around with bags of soil during a "Spring into Recovery" meeting also attended by roughly 40 Monmouth County members of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) support group. The event took place March 31 at the Community Church of Colts Neck.

The Master Gardeners of Monmouth County brought slides, a variety of cuttings and other ingredients, and guided participants through the planting process. And at the night's end, everyone left with a starter pot of greenery.

The project was "inspired by the idea that lots of people talk about the benefits of gardening -- whether it's vegetables or flowers -- of getting out in the fresh air, exercise, and the sense of accomplishment," said Jay Yudof, statewide consumer outreach liaison for NAMI of New Jersey.

And while the program focused on houseplants -- the temperature outside wasn't yet conducive to supporting new transplants -- the goal was to whet the appetites of future gardeners, said master gardener Jeanne Lynch, who presented a slide show on indoor foliage.

"Gardening cultivates inner personality traits like tenacity, dedication, patience, perseverance," Lynch said, "and through your trials of planting, keeps you strong."

Master gardener Carol Davies of Belmar added, "It has lots of health benefits, including a calming effect."

McLean said: "During my husband's illness, gardening really helped. It seemed to have been the only time I could clear my mind."

The NAMI group included consumers of mental health services, family members and employees and volunteers of the Self-Help Center, sponsored by the recovery-oriented Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey.

"I've been a consumer my whole life but was never aware of my illness -- major depression -- until 1996," said Michael Craig, 47, Freehold, president of the Self-Help Center. Craig and his fiancée, Stacey Rosenthal, Marlboro, met at the center.

Adam Blum, Howell, volunteers as a facilitator at the center. Blum, diagnosed with major depression, is also blind. He attended the garden event with his service dog, Nate.

"I love gardening," he said. "My mother's always planting something; now I can do my own."

NAMI support groups welcome people with a wide range of symptoms -- depression, anger, "anything that ails them," Yudof said.

"There's no diagnosis requirement; we keep it open so people can look at how they may want to step in. Our biggest frustration is the constant flow of people who come in and say, 'Why didn't someone tell me about you 10 years ago?'"

Raising awareness is a slow process, even among those in the mental health field, he said. "I've walked into a meeting of professionals and had social workers ask, 'What's NAMI?'"

That lack of understanding places mental health "at least a generation behind the addiction community in terms of standards of care," he added, "because a doctor today will refer an addict to treatment, and the justice system will send people to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings. Those kinds of referrals don't happen very often for people with mental disorders."

About 100 AA meetings are held every week in Monmouth County, with probably another 20 in Spanish, compared to only 10 to 15 mental illness meetings a month, Yudof said.

Albert Ervin, Freehold Township, said he attends all the NAMI of Monmouth support group meetings and felt particularly comfortable at the prospect of gardening, since he grew up in farm country in South Carolina.

"I love vegetables," he added.

Another participant with previous gardening experience, Joe Lamela-Macchia, 27, Middletown, studies horticulture and botany and the medicinal uses for succulent plants.

Diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1998 and later obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as well, Lamela-Macchia said medications he tried were mostly ineffective but his bipolar symptoms improved dramatically after treatment with electroconvulsant therapy (ECT). He now works as a mental health advocate, speaking publicly to groups on the benefits of ECT.

While the treatment -- formerly known as shock therapy -- has a controversial history, modern methods can be lifesaving for some people, he said. "It has given me my life back."