



Kids, Vets, and Bees: Building Community Through Horticulture

The thriving Memorial native pollinator Garden features native Pacific Northwest plants selected to support local bees, butterflies, and other essential pollinators.

PHOTO BY MANDI ATKINSON

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Two miles north of the Columbia River – shared between the borders of Washington and Oregon – sits a green oasis for those who serve our country. That oasis – VA FARMS in Vancouver, Washington – welcomed a new addition on Memorial Day Weekend this year: a Memorial native pollinator garden.

During the opening event, Veterans, families, caregivers, staff, and other community members ambled among native plants chosen by hospitalized children with guidance from local beekeepers, master gardeners, landscape architects, and horticultural therapists.

The creative collaboration to build the site “began about nine months prior”, says Mandi Atkinson, Horticultural Therapist and Therapeutic Garden Coordinator at the Veterans Administration (VA) Portland Health Care System.

Atkinson helps lead the VA FARMS, or Veterans Affairs Farming and Recovery Mental Health Services. American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) president Kelly Warnick approached Atkinson to make VA FARMS a site for the ongoing AHTA Growing Impact: Youth Wellness Campaign and Atkinson got right to work: “Everyone that I spoke to about the project had a big smile on their faces knowing that the kids would be picking out the plants”.

The Vancouver VA FARMS, which is part of the VA's Whole Health program, provides health and wellbeing services for Veterans, while supporting training in horticulture and agriculture. They are partnered with many internal programs at the Vancouver VA, such as hosting an edible essentials class teaching veterans about sustainable gardening and providing horticultural work training for recipients of HUD-VASH, the VA housing assistance program.

The site was started as a small pollinator healing garden by groundskeeper Scott Hoffman nearly a decade ago. When the U.S. Government appropriated funding to establish the VA FARMS program in 2018, Hoffman applied and won, becoming one of ten such sites across the U.S.

Their first garden was a bus-ride away outside of Portland, Oregon. “But they lost that site”, said Atkinson, “so Scott found an empty patch of grass on the Vancouver campus, cut the sod, partnered with volunteers from Boy Scouts of America, and built a little

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A visitor to the Pediatric Nature Station makes her picks with the help of a parent
PHOTO BY REBECCA PIERCE

garden place to sit in." That site evolved into a hub of nutrition programming, a core part of Veterans' treatment programming, and a community gathering space. Atkinson later joined the garden and updated the paths to make them accessible for wheelchairs. Today, the plot is expansive, filled with native flowers, bamboo potato towers, a hybrid pear orchard, and a whimsical red barn.

Atkinson connected with Meghan McKiernan, Horticultural Therapist and Manager of the Therapeutic Gardens Program at Legacy Health in Portland, Oregon just across the river. Meghan helps to lead an extensive suite of horticultural programming offered in the healing gardens at Legacy Health's medical centers. The weekly Pediatric Nature Stations at Randall Children's Hospital became an ideal incubator to generate ideas for the budding Memorial native pollinator garden project.

The Nature Stations – offered by Legacy Health since 1997 – are pop-up nature activity tables for pediatric patients and their families. Set up throughout the hospital and its prolific gardens, the Nature Stations offer hands-on nature-based activities such as investigating leaves under a magnifying glass and making seasonal flower greeting cards. As part of the AHTA Growing Impact: Youth Wellness Campaign, about 30 pediatric patients visiting the Nature Stations each voted on seven native plants they wanted to see included in the upcoming garden installation at VA FARMS in Vancouver.

Once the selections were made, community organization the Elks and industry professionals Nature Play Designs assisted in



Volunteer helps plant creeping thyme in new pollinator garden for a Memorial Day planting.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VANCOUVER VA FARMS

procuring plants. McKiernan reflected, "It was a fun way to highlight how horticulture can lead through different communities – even if the kids weren't onsite, it was still a fun Portland metro area project".

In the weeks leading up to the garden's opening, VA FARMS hosted the Vancouver Bee Project in a series of classes for the Veterans. A local pollinator sanctuary group, the Vancouver Bee Project identifies grassy areas around Vancouver and repopulates them with native plants to support healthy bee populations. The four-week series of bee classes culminated in a final planting day; a wide collection of community members joined in for the planting.

"It was really moving to see Veterans that I hadn't seen in a while... seeing them show up, just so happy to be here", said Atkinson. "Memorial Day can be a tough holiday for Veterans – we wanted to have a day to celebrate community". Atkinson continued, "gardens can just be used as a kind of community tool and a way to connect different communities that wouldn't necessarily be connected otherwise."

McKiernan agreed, "Mandi and I have talked about doing an annual event together. I would love to do another event together."

