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Horticulture Training Program Helps Persons with Disabilities Build on their Strengths

By Julie A. Best

The Conecuh Adult Activity Center in Evergreen is dedicated to enhancing the lives of individuals with mental retardation or disabilities.

Leonard Millender, Mental Retardation Supervisor at the center, says, "Basically, what we do is train our consumers so that they can be self-sufficient in the community. The services and support that the Center provides must be anchored in a clear understanding of each person's unique needs and preferences." The Center is proud of a new program that many of their consumers want to be a part of—the Horticulture Training Program.

Millender says, "As Mental Retardation Supervisor, my job is to find some type of training and work activities for our consumers. I met with the City of Evergreen Mayor and we decided that we wanted to initiate a Horticulture Training Program, but at the same time, use the program as a means to market our merchandise. In the past, we have been doing arts and crafts and woodworking. Once we finished the product, often times it was just boxed up. When looking for a new training program, I wanted something that could be useful in our community."



Bonnie Palmore trains persons with disabilities to perform horticulture tasks at the Conecuh Adult Activity Center in Evergreen.



Norman Burton (left), Coordinator for Ala-Tom RC&D Council and Leonard Millender, Mental Retardation Supervisor for the Conecuh County Adult Activity Center.

designed for persons with disabilities. Millender says, "We are dealing with handicapped and mentally retarded individuals, so we wanted to set up the greenhouse to meet their needs. The aisles are wider and we have more concrete than most greenhouses to enable handicapped individuals to move around easily. There is a training area at the front of the greenhouse."

One of the characteristics of a mentally handicapped individual is repeat behavior. Millender says, "They will continue to perform in the way that they have been trained. If you change the process, it confuses them. Our goal is to train them the right way the first time, and that's the way they will continue to perform."

Bonnie Palmore is head of the greenhouse and trains the mental health consumers. Palmore says, "My job is to take the clients into the greenhouse and train them in the various tasks. I show them how to fill a tray with potting soil and how to plant the seed. After the seeds come up, they learn to transplant. They learn to water. When we are finished working for the day, they learn how to clean up and put everything back into its proper place. We started small, training five to eight consumers. As time goes on, we will expand the program."

When asked how the consumers are responding to the training, Millender said,

Millender wears many hats. In addition to being the supervisor for the Center, Millender is also a Conecuh County Commissioner and a member of the Ala-Tom Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council. With all those connections, Millender knew just where to turn to request funds to install a greenhouse for the Horticulture Training Program.

He contacted Norman Burton, Coordinator of the Ala-Tom RC&D Council. The RC&D program is a unique program administered by USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that empowers rural people to help themselves. What Millender wanted to do at the Center fell right into the goals and objectives of the education component of the RC&D program.

With grant funds from the Ala-Tom RC&D Council, provided through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Center built a greenhouse that is specifically



Greenhouse trainees learn to water and care for the plants.

“Our consumers love it! More want to work in the greenhouse than Bonnie can train at this time. Our consumers are trained to follow instructions and to stay on task. Once the first group of consumers is trained, then Bonnie can give them instructions, which they can carry out, and then she can work with new trainees.”

Palmore says, “The consumers are responding and learning. We have several that were not interested in anything, but they are interested in the greenhouse work. Most of the consumers are doing very well and catching on quickly—especially in the areas where they can work. I have different ones doing different jobs, according to their abilities.”

Palmore and her greenhouse assistant Mary Mitchell keep detailed records of everything that is planted in the greenhouse—what was planted, when, how long it took the plant to come up, where the seeds came from, and the chemicals used on the plants. The records serve two purposes: 1) provide a history of the plant, and 2) enables other staff to take over and supervise when Bonnie or Mary are not there.

About the Horticulture Training Program, Millender says, “We think it is a good thing. It’s something that our folks can do and not just stay inside the Center. The greenhouse is a year round activity and the product is marketable. We don’t have to go out and sell; the people come to us!”

The City of Evergreen has contracted with the Center to provide plants for winter landscaping. The Center will grow several varieties of pansies that the City will use around city hall, in the park, and in various public areas. Millender says, “It’s great to have the product sold in advance.”

Burton says, “The Government and Ala-Tom RC&D Council want to be responsive to the specific needs of our citizens. The RC&D Council has never really been able, or had the opportunity, to help this part of society. It was a good opportunity for the Ala-Tom RC&D Council to be able, for the first time, to help a segment of society that is often overlooked.”

Empowering individuals with mental retardation and developmental disabilities to speak out for themselves is an essential component of a service system that values all individuals’ contributions to a community. The Horticulture Training Program at the Conecuh Adult Activity Center is doing just that. One consumer, who could neither hear nor speak, when asked if she enjoyed working in the greenhouse, kissed her hand. That was her way of saying, “I love this work!” The Center has found a way to build on the strengths of their consumers and to help them to be productive citizens of their community.

In addition to the grant from the Ala-Tom RC&D Council, many other partners helped make the Horticulture Training Program a possibility. Other partners included the Alabama Cooperative Extension System; the Conecuh County Commission; the City of Evergreen; the Southwest Alabama Mental Health Board, Inc.; and the Conecuh County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Julie A. Best is the Public Affairs Specialist for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in Auburn.

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