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## Causes Week 2016: Greenery specialist uses gardening to help dementia patients



From left: Apex Harmony Lodge residents Alwi Sulaiman, 87, and Lian Sing Huang, 65, spend two hours, twice a week, at Greenology. There, they place young plants in new pots and clean decorative moss. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

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Twice a week, Mr Lian Sing Huang, 65, spends his afternoon potting young plants. While the prospect of packing dozens of seedlings in soil may make many groan, the seemingly monotonous task never fails to put a smile on his face.

"I like planting the best and look forward to it," Mr Lian said in Mandarin. "It helps me recall my childhood days."

He spent his early years in Kampong Loyang, where he grew his own vegetables and reared chickens, ducks and pigs. Though it has been more than four decades since he moved out of the kampung, a bit of gardening brings the memories right back.

It is in part the activity's remarkable ability to jog Mr Lian's memory that makes his twice-weekly ritual so valuable. He suffers from dementia, an illness which affects the brain, leading to loss of memory, a decline in thinking abilities and even personality changes.

Since 2014, seniors from Apex Harmony Lodge (AHL), a purpose-built home for people with dementia, have enjoyed gardening activities as part of the lodge's Therapy Through Work programme, which helps keep residents' lives as close to their pre-dementia days as possible through therapeutic "work" sessions.



In our annual Causes Week, back for its fifth year, we spotlight individuals and groups that are making a difference in the community, and look at how others might pitch in too.

The sessions are the result of a partnership with urban greenery specialist Greenology, which has offered horticulture therapy to various groups since its launch in 2008, as a means of giving back.

"The relationship between people and plants cannot be stopped," said Mr Veera Sekaran, 54, Greenology's managing director.

"I think people with challenged needs, including dementia patients, find natural solace when they come closer to plants and nature."

A total of 29 seniors from AHL visit the centre four times a week to conduct two sessions for men and two for women.

During the two-hour sessions, they place young plants in new pots and also clean decorative moss so that it can be mounted on panels.

Such activities are thought to improve memory, attention span, sense of responsibility and coordination in those with dementia.



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"They do repetitive movements of potting and planting, but at the same time, they are interacting socially," said Mr Veera.

"When they are doing something seemingly mundane, it jogs memories... They start talking about the times when they were young, and that literally brings back memory cycles in them."

The elderly with dementia are not the only ones who benefit from therapy. Other sessions are also held for youth with special needs.

The programme for students allows young people with disabilities to gain work experience.



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"We realise that there is an opportunity for the students to find employment in the horticulture industry, and Greenology has many new initiatives in this industry that allow our students to benefit from learning them," said a spokesman for APSN Katong School, one of the special education schools working with Greenology.

At Greenology, students learn a variety of processes, such as repotting plants and cleaning moss. Their time in a work environment also teaches them to be more independent and disciplined.

"I think these are special kids. They are talented and gifted... and the potential they have just has to be discovered," said Mr

Veera.

"I would appreciate it if a lot more companies would look at them and give them opportunities and hopefully find employment for them."

• For more information on Greenology, go to [greenology.sg](http://greenology.sg) or contact them on 6214-1140 or e-mail [green@greenology.sg](mailto:green@greenology.sg)

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