



## Making the most of your green space: Medford Leas shares benefits, strategies

**‘Connecting to nature makes sense for everyone’—a simple thought that is powerful on many levels, according to management at Medford Leas**

*by Jane Weston, BS*

Nature and the Medford Leas community are inseparable. The community’s two New Jersey campuses—one in Medford and one in Lumberton— together comprise more than 200 acres designated as the Barton Arboretum and Nature Preserve. Here, residents and staff are provided with a beautiful and unique environment within which to live and work—and guests are offered a compelling and instructive place to visit. This article offers some background on Medford Leas and an overview of the benefits of the community’s close ties to nature, as well as

strategies that all communities can use to maximize the impact and value of their green spaces.

### **Nature by design, not accident**

The Estaugh, a Quaker-related, not-for-profit corporation, founded Medford Leas in 1971 as a continuing care retirement community. Today, the community offers residential and healthcare services to more than 600 individuals ages 55 and older. As part of its mission, the Estaugh chose to create this community in harmony with nature. In 1981, the Estaugh Board of Trustees, under the leadership of its then-president, Lewis W. Barton, and with guidance from the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania, designated the entire acreage as an arboretum.

It was by design, not accident, that the founders of Medford Leas committed themselves to creating an engaging landscape for residents and carrying on the Quaker belief in the value and restorative qualities of plants and other aspects of nature. Currently, the arboretum offers residents, staff and visitors a diverse horticultural array of designed gardens, landscaped grounds, meadows, natural woodlands and wetlands. It also features one of the most extensive plant collections (including native plants) in all of southern New Jersey.

The arboretum's mission is to promote the appreciation and knowledge of horticulture and to emphasize the importance of integrating nature into people's living, working and recreational environments. Further, the arboretum strives to be a model for good land stewardship by achieving greater ecological responsibility through biodiverse and sustainable practices.

Research has shown that sustained contact with the natural environment can provide a better quality of life for everyone, but the potential is even greater for older adults. Connecting

with nature—whether by walking, gardening, hiking, bird watching or simply “smelling the roses”—enhances people's sense of well-being. Nature can nurture us physically, psychologically and even spiritually.

University of Illinois environmental and behavioral scientist Frances (Ming) Kuo, PhD, has found that green environments provide natural recreational and physical playscapes for all ages, enhancing fitness while relieving stress. Her findings include the following:<sup>1</sup>

- Access to nature and green environments yields better cognitive functioning, more self-discipline and impulse control, and greater mental health overall.
- Less access to nature is linked to higher rates of anxiety disorders, and higher rates of clinical depression.
- Greener environments enhance recovery from surgery, enable and support higher levels of physical activity, improve immune system functioning, help people with diabetes achieve healthier blood glucose levels, and improve functional health status and independent living skills among older adults.
- By contrast, environments with less green space are associated with greater rates of childhood obesity; higher rates of 15 out of 24 categories of physician-diagnosed diseases, including cardiovascular diseases; and higher rates of mortality in younger and older adults.

Kuo is quoted as saying, “In greener settings, we find that people are more generous and more sociable. We find stronger neighborhood social ties and greater sense of community, more mutual trust and willingness to help others. In less green environments, we find higher rates of aggression, violence, violent crime, and property crime—even after controlling for income and other differences,” Kuo continues. “We also

### **Quick tips to develop more nature-friendly programming**

As health and wellness professionals, ICAA members need to be aware of how nature and the environment can add depth and meaning in our communities and businesses. Here are some additional suggestions for bringing programs that support access to nature to our customers and to the larger community:

- Develop outdoor areas where individuals can engage in activities such as meditation, fitness classes and yoga.
- Expand existing programs to involve the outdoors—gardening and birding are just two examples.
- Invite guest speakers such as horticulturalists or “green” advocates to make presentations; these individuals can help get people thinking in more “natural” directions.
- Ask your constituents for their thoughts and ideas on including the natural environment in your programs.

find more evidence of loneliness and more individuals reporting inadequate social support.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Benefits to residents**

Our interaction with nature does not end just because we age. People have a lifelong connection with the outdoor environment in varying degrees. For some, this participation may be subtle and consist of simply watching other people walk or work outdoors. For others, there is a deeper connection, through gardening, bird watching, exercising, painting, and related pursuits.

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*Research shows that in green settings, people tend to be more generous and more sociable*

In speaking with Medford Leas residents, we learned that a primary reason for their interest in gardening, sustainability, greening and connecting to nature is that these offer a way to focus on fitness and wellness activities, and to reduce stress.

Many of our residents say that being involved in nature elicits feelings of peacefulness, quiet and tranquility. Others emphasize that their commitment goes beyond their own sense of well-being; they have an eye to the future, and see their involvement in green projects as a way to leave the earth more environmentally sound for their grandchildren and future generations.

For many residents, gardening has always been an integral part of their

lives—so it makes sense that it remains important to them as they grow older.

### **Benefits to the community at large**

Medford Leas is not solely the purview of the residents, however. These horticultural treasures are also shared with the general public. Local garden clubs, master gardeners, horticulture professors and students, and professional landscapers take advantage of this setting and collaborate with Medford Leas to offer tours and educational programs for both our residents and guests, many of whom are prospective residents.

In addition, Medford Leas' residents and staff engage in service projects with

the local community. One example is an Eagle Scout project to build raised-height planters so that residents could get their hands in the earth even if they are not able to bend down to touch the ground. In another project, a Boy Scout troop helped to construct a canoe dock so that residents could easily launch their canoes into the creek that borders the campus.

Not only did these projects increase the residents' ability to connect with nature, but they also provided a wonderful intergenerational community experience. There was significant learning that took place between the generations—from learning what color of flower residents preferred (red) to what the Boy Scouts enjoyed for snacks to fortify their work (chocolate chip cookies).

## Making the most of your own natural resources

Even if your organization does not have ready access to landscaped grounds, meadows and natural woodlands, I encourage you to think creatively about the resources you do have within your reach that will allow you to incorporate more nature and greening activities into your programs. Also consider ways that you can expand these opportunities by inviting the public to participate. I believe that every community, business and organization can find ways to interact with nature in a positive fashion.

For example, all brick-and-mortar organizations have an entrance to their community or business. How can you design that entrance to reflect your interest in nature and greening? One way is to invest in native plants. These plants typically adapt more easily to your environment and should have longevity. An entrance that is designed to reflect nature makes a statement about the values of the organization.

Dining provides another opportunity to incorporate nature. Many communities offer outdoor dining spaces, for example. Combine outdoor dining with food sourced from local farms and you provide yet another strong connection to nature.

Even if your organization can't accommodate outdoor dining, you can still include locally grown foods at mealtime **[Ed. See the article, "How to bring green dining to scale," on page 10].** Or, consider hosting a local farmer's market during the growing season and open it to the public.

If you don't have enough space to host a market, consider having a local chef provide a cooking lesson using local foods. These types of activities that connect people to nature have been very successful at Medford Leas. We find that as interest in nature and greening are on the rise, there is benefit to offering programs on these topics as a way to get people to come through the doors, interact with you, and become acquainted with the community.

Many of the ongoing arboretum activities within Medford Leas are open to the public as well. For example, you might be able to host a lecture on a topic involving nature, or feature a speaker who has experience in "greening" as a way of sharing and connecting with the public.

At Medford Leas, we also offer local not-for-profit groups the opportunity to meet within Medford Leas' community spaces for their monthly meetings and/or special annual meetings, programs or luncheons. Over the years, we have hosted flower shows and annual meetings and luncheons, and served as a host site for hands-on educational programming, such as pruning seminars. Such informal visits go a long way toward introducing Medford Leas to the community. Residents are encouraged to participate, so they can share their experience of living here.

Every April, we host a series of programs that are offered throughout our two campuses. Activities include woodland trail walks, birding walks, wreath making, kayaking, outdoor yoga classes, and meditation in the garden. Many of these programs are open to the public as part of our outreach to the community and to potential customers. Think about ways your organization can celebrate spring and invite the public in.

September brings another round of activities, in celebration of Medford Leas Active Living Month. The month, inspired by the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)'s Active Aging Week, focuses on the seven dimensions of wellness, as highlighted by ICAA.

We also provide ongoing opportunities for the public to connect with us, including opening our grounds up for walking, running and biking on our trail and activity systems, and for educational and informal visits to the arboretum and nature preserve.

### The bottom line

Outdoor settings allow individuals to connect with something larger than themselves. Gardening, walking in the woods, sitting on a bench by the lake,


## Resources

### Medford Leas

[www.medfordleas.org](http://www.medfordleas.org)

### Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania

[www.business-services.upenn.edu/arboretum](http://www.business-services.upenn.edu/arboretum)

and listening to the birds sing are just a few of the many ways people can find meaning in their lives. That connection with nature can bring peace and refuge—a means of getting away from the distractions of everyday life. It helps keep us well mentally, physically and spiritually. In the end, understanding the benefits that nature brings encourages our residents, members, customers—and ourselves—to place greater meaning on wellness and its contribution to quality of life. 

*Jane Weston, BS, is director of marketing and community relations at Medford Leas, a nationally accredited Quaker-related not-for-profit community for people 55+. On staff for over nine years, Weston is responsible for much of the Arboretum programming on the campuses—working to provide programs for the local community, as well as residents of the Medford Leas community.*

## References

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2. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences News. (2011, April 20). NRES News: NRES researcher finds that green environments are essential for human health. Retrieved on October 15, 2011, from [http://nres.illinois.edu/News\\_Green\\_Environment\\_Kuo](http://nres.illinois.edu/News_Green_Environment_Kuo).

Images courtesy of Medford Leas