

Taking it to the top

Because of a scarcity of land, one Chicago nursing home turns to its roof for garden space. Residents tend to a variety of plants and flowers



Photos: The Selfhelp Home



BY BRETT BAKSHIS

For many older people, there's nothing more relaxing than spending time in the garden—planting bulbs, pulling weeds, and enjoying fresh air, sunshine and kinship with nature.

But in a city nursing home, space is a precious commodity that some facilities can't afford to spend on ferns and flowers.

Located in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, however, The Selfhelp Home is a long-term care facility that offers independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing care and, to the delight of its many residents, a garden on the roof.

"When the residents enjoy gardening and you don't have a lot of land surrounding

Planters are spaced around the roof at The Selfhelp Home. Residents take control of all the planning, planting and upkeep of their gardens.

your facility, the only thing to do is go up, and that's exactly what we did," says Hedy Ciocci, the facility's administrator.

For eight years now, families, friends and residents at The Selfhelp Home have enjoyed the luxury of their rooftop garden.

The "seed money" for the project, as Ciocci calls it, came from a very generous family member who bequeathed a substantial amount to the facility to get the garden started.

Residents' choice

The first step was to consult with a horticulturist to make sure the roof of this nine-story building would be suitable to sustain life. Once they got the (green) thumbs up,

Lessons learned

- 1** Short on space? The roof isn't just for the birds. Try using it for activities
- 2** Letting residents plan a garden helps them feel like a part of the project
- 3** While you're at it, an herb garden can spice up your facility's cuisine

the residents were good to grow.

The garden at the Selfhelp Home is not a traditional garden, and not only because it's located 100 feet above the ground. Instead of a patch of dirt, residents sow their seeds in waist-high planters placed around the deck. This ensures that both active seniors and those with disabilities who use wheelchairs all can get their hands dirty, so to speak.

Every April, a trip is made to the local horticulturalist to pick the annuals. The seniors have total control over what grows in their garden. Petunias and snapdragons are particular favorites.

"The planning, the planting and the weekly caring is completed by our residents, their families and our staff," says Ciocci.

"There is also an herbal garden grown and harvested by the staff for use by our culinary department," says Barbara Snower, Selfhelp Home's director of communications. Basil, thyme and other tasty plants populate that section of the rooftop garden.

Join the club

For the seniors at Selfhelp Home, gardening isn't just a relaxing way to spend an afternoon. It's also an educational experience.

Every week, as part of a gardening club, residents are treated to a presentation on a different type of plant. One never knows where the conversation will lead, Snower says. But as with any discussion group, the object is to socialize, she explains. The topic of the talk doesn't really matter.

The rooftop garden is so popular, additional seating was added this year to accommodate all the gardeners and their visitors. And as an added treat, residents can enjoy a rooftop ice cream social four afternoons per week.

"You walk out on the deck and it's just beautiful," Activities Director Fern Shaffer says. "You see the skyline behind you and you can even see parts of Lake Michigan, and you're surrounded by beautiful flowers. It makes everybody feel good." ■