

Connecting with Nature through Education

Enriching the lives of people of all ages and ability levels through botanical art.

STORY BY *Barbara Hanft*

IN SUPPORT OF ASBA'S STRATEGIC PLAN AND CORE VALUES, botanical artists have provided education outreach through projects specially designed to connect people of all ages and ability levels with plants and botanical art. Painting and spending time in green environments is both a satisfying and healthy endeavor, and botanical artists are in a unique position "to convey the remarkable beauty, functionality, diversity and importance of plants we portray" to the general public. When "we connect images with ideas and people with plants," we offer others a path to enriching their own lives. (For a complete list of core values see <https://www.asba-art.org/about-asba-our-core-values>.) Two art projects, developed by ASBA members Barbara Hanft and Judy Brown, offer an expanded perspective on how botanical artists can connect underserved populations with art and nature.

The first project was designed by Barbara for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities attending the Monarch Beach Club, a day program operated statewide by Monarch, a not-for-profit organization in North Carolina that also offers programs to people with substance use disorders and mental illness. Barbara teamed up with an art therapist and local artists and designed a project to broaden Monarch's clients' appreciation of the ways trees and flowers enrich our lives.

LESSON PLAN: Connecting plants and our daily lives (one 90 minute session)

OBJECTIVE: Paint and plant a flower pot

MATERIALS

Awareness: Contribution of plants in our daily lives

Fruits and vegetables, ginger cookies; cotton, ramie, and linen clothing; woven twig basket; books and magazines; cotton quilt; paper hats; wooden spoons, bowls, and doll chairs

Skill development: Sequencing, eye hand coordination; basic painting techniques

6" plastic flower pots; acrylic paint; paintbrushes (#6); plastic plates (for palettes); potting soil; plants (shade-fatsia, elephant ears; sun-marigolds, vinca, and obedience plants)

The second project, a botanical art course developed by Judy for residents of Riderwood Senior Living Community, is sponsored by the SAGE (Seasoned Adults Growing Educationally) program in the Prince George Community College in Maryland. As adjunct faculty, Judy develops a 15-week course focused on painting a specific plant (e.g., pansies, coneflowers) for her students who pay nominal semester and course material fees to SAGE. Each class meets weekly for three hours. The students bring their own watercolor paints and colored pencils; Judy supplies paper, mask, erasers, specific paint/pencil colors, and plant specimens.

Considerations for working with special populations

Adults with intellectual disabilities learn best and participate in discussion when they can see and touch materials. "To help the group engage, I planned an interactive introduction to how plants add to our daily lives, and passed around a variety of everyday items made



ABOVE, TOP. White outlines on the dark pots compensated for low vision; additional space at a nearby table may help an individual participate in and focus on the task at hand.

BOTTOM. A plastic plate with squirts of color arranged around the perimeter works well as a palette; note how Christine has learned to blot the water from her brush before applying another color to her flower pot.

from plants, including ginger cookies (which we ate). We talked about what each item was made from and where the plant grew. I also displayed plants dug up from my garden for each person to select and arrange in his or her painted flower pot."

Solicit and honor the life experiences of all participants. Individuals of all ability levels have information and experiences to share. Drawing from his work experience in landscaping, Ward led the discussion with his Monarch friends about the importance of trees in our daily lives. Judy observed, "Seniors have so many life experiences to contribute. Some are experienced artists who are familiar with other art media and styles of painting, and are delighted to share their knowledge while learning themselves how to paint plants in detail."

Consider the physical as well as cognitive abilities of participants, and introduce simple adaptations to compensate for any challenges. For example, "I outlined a simple design of flowers and leaves in white paint to contrast with the dark background of the flower pots to compensate for the low vision of several participants."

Art projects also provide ample opportunities to expand basic painting techniques as well as skill in sequencing actions and eye-hand coordination (e.g., by holding a brush in one hand and a flower pot or paper with the other hand).

Collaborate with the agencies providing programming for a designated group (e.g., social services, developmental disabilities, special education, or a local Office on Aging program, arts council, or community college). Look for collaborators in horticultural, occupational and art therapists, artists and teachers who can provide ideas and help with adaptations and provide ideas for successful projects. Always solicit comments about your project from program staff who know your participants best (e.g., who needs special attention, additional space, what art supplies are on hand).

Outcomes: Pride and collegiality

The participants in both projects were proud of their artistic accomplishments and had enhanced their appreciation for how plants contribute to our daily lives. Collaboration among artists, program staff and participants sparked a creative process enjoyed by everyone involved. Best of all, it was a pleasure to contribute to the camaraderie and fellowship among participants as they worked on their projects. 🌱



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT. Now 90 years strong, Betty's interest in art flourished when her grandma gave her a box of colored pencils when she was six years old. "Botanical art is so much fun, and I love the fellowship with friends." Penny is thrilled with her success at learning to paint plants using watercolor. Steve proudly shows off his painted flower pot. "I love the outdoors, so botanical art is a good fit for me." Friends proudly display their newly painted and planted pots.

"We invited a botanical artist to lead a workshop for our Power of Art project linking local social service programs and artists. Participants not only painted beautiful pots, but created their own small landscapes within the pots and learned about the importance of plants in both history and everyday life. Visual artists assisted the botanical artist, making for a fun and well-rounded experience."

FAY DAVIS EDWARDS, DARE COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL, NC

Barbara Hanft is an occupational therapist with a graduate degree in counseling psychology. She received a certification in botanical art and illustration in 2011 from the Brookside Gardens School of Botanical Art and Illustration, founded by ASBA member Margaret Saul.