

TASTE

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THE PLAIN DEALER

LOCAL FLAVOR

Tilling the soil's good for what ails the spirit

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Those who grow their own vegetables can tell you what it does for the soul, not to mention one's health. So it's no surprise to find farm therapy at Hopewell, a residential treatment center for the mentally ill in Mesopotamia, a rural section of Trumbull County.

Joe, a 19-year-old from Nashville, Tenn., said he has been angry and anxious at times during his 11-month stay at the center and even walked off a few of the jobs he agreed to do. Well, more than a few.

"Hundreds," he said.

But when he heads into the field to pull weeds around the asparagus or shares credit at dinner for the strawberries he grew, his attitude changes. Walk away from garden duties?

"Never," he said.

Under a misty spring sky this month, Joe pulled those weeds and harvested the strawberries he helped to grow. His fellow resident, Scott, checked on the potted herbs in the greenhouse that will be used to flavor dishes at Hopewell's annual benefit Friday, June 20.

When it opened as a private facility in 1996, taking up residence in a former country inn, Hopewell became one of many farms modeled after the Gould Farm in Medford, Mass. That farm's acting director, Cory Loder, said by phone he has never seen a statistical study linking farm work to mental health, but plenty of people benefit from that combination.

Relationships are a major struggle for those who suffer from depression, he said.

"Our long-held belief is that those relationships can be forged most successfully through real work . . . close to the land and other living beings," he said.

Hopewell's farm manager, Judy Schuknecht, has seen residents benefit from focusing on farm tasks, teaching others what they have learned and sharing credit at the harvest table.

Raising skills raises confidence and creates lasting change, said Leslie Mapes, Hopewell's director of development.

"This kind of therapy has been around for 100 years in this country, where farms took in people who needed help," said Mapes.

"In Europe, farms took in the rich and poor. The well-off didn't have to do anything, but the poor had to work.

"Guess who got better?"

Busy at the benefits

The farm theme for Hopewell's June 20 benefit will be fully explored. Turn-of-the-century barns at a Gates Mills estate are being cleared and primped. Spice of Life caterer Ben Bebenroth will mix herbs from Hopewell's farm program into a marinade for leg of lamb. He'll sprinkle them on local goat cheese paired with a slice of linguica (Portuguese sausage) and a dab of mustard. He'll blend thyme into a smoked trout dip. For tickets, \$175 to \$400, call 440-693-4074.