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Life at Taylor Community springs back in post-pandemic phase

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LACONIA — Paula Chambers, 74, who came from Georgia, found a calling and nickname during COVID-19 that may spark vines at the Taylor Community's locations in Laconia and Wolfeboro, with help from others who like to garden. She also hopes to lure newcomers who have uncovered

the joys of dabbling in dirt while sheltering at home during the pandemic.

Chambers, the retired director of a science museum, is now known as Paula the Pollinator Planter at the Taylor Community. With the alacrity and energy of a lifelong science buff, she is jump-starting a project to grow plants that attract bees and butterflies — nature's pollinators — to

do the dirty work that's essential to continuing our food stream: carrying pollen from one plant to the next, a cycle that is indispensable to what we eat.

"I wanted an opportunity for residents to learn about how important nature's pollinators are," said Chambers, who researched native plants while she was hunkered down at the

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Paula Chambers, a plant buff and transplant from Georgia who lives at the Taylor Community, holds her first-ever crop of New Hampshire-grown carrots. She also coaches others on raised bed and container gardening, shown at right, a combination of “thrillers, fillers and spillers” to entertain the eyes. (Courtesy photos)

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retirement community during the coronavirus. In her former life, Chambers visited Mexico, studying populations of butterflies that wintered south of the border, and was inspired to do something to protect endangered bees and butterflies, the tiniest agriculture laborers. “One bite of every three comes from bees pollinating the food,” she said.



Now, Chambers hopes to attract new adherents, to join the hobbyists she’s won over so far – including Alexis Dorf, who moved here from Sharon, Connecticut, in January 2020, just before the coronavirus shuttered much of daily life.

“I can barely tell a tulip from a daffodil. I’m not a plant person,” said Dorf, who ran a horse farm in Northwest Connecticut before relocating. “When I was a kid I said I would have a cement lawn.”

Now’s she’s a born-again gardener, joining the ranks of seasoned gardeners and skeptics who cultivated their passion during COVID, as home improvements and gardening blossomed while more people worked from home. Now, along with a healthy lineup of outdoor activities, gardening is growing by leaps and bounds at the Taylor Community, with residents age 65 and up who can use it for exercise, fresh air, outdoor decorating and social life. “People here are really into those raised beds,” Dorf said. “Last year they added more because there was such a demand for them.”

Especially with the arrival of spring and warm, sunny weather, socially distanced activities discovered or resorted to for surviving solitude during the coronavirus are poised to endure beyond the pandemic. At retirement communities and nursing homes, more activities – including dining and hanging out with friends, whether for coffee or cocktails and beer – are being done outside, with masks, now that residents have been vaccinated.

At the Belknap County Nursing Home, the arrival of warm, sunny days ushers in rites of spring and summer that officially begin on Memorial Day – like Friday night cocktails on the patio, s’mores in small groups at the fire pit, cheese and cracker socials outside and gardening in raised beds that are socially distanced, allowing conversation while residents plant squash, peas and beans. At nursing homes, indoor life is moving outside when possible.

At the Taylor Community, the new normal post-COVID will include more outdoor activities, such as concerts, lectures, exercise classes and dining in an outside pavilion that was built last spring with money from an anonymous donor, said Gretchen Gandini, Taylor’s director of development and community engagement. “There were good things that came out of it that will continue in this new normal,” she

said, including the Taylor Grand Prix, a road race and driving and parking challenge that will occur again May 12, with residents motoring between pit stops where they get their windshield washed or pause for beverages and snacks. Some independent-living neighborhoods at Taylor have reveled in holding outdoor, socially-distanced block parties or small gatherings in their neighbors' backyards.

Outdoor life

Friends get together there informally, bringing lawn chairs to sit outside, including Jim O'Brien, 74, who moved here from Nashua in October, and spent most of the winter listening to podcasts on investments, cryptocurrency, genomics, artificial intelligence and health topics. "I started to learn new things at an old age," said O'Brien. "It was a lot of fun."

Outdoor life has been key to meeting people and finding new friends. "I'm a walker so I meet a lot of walkers. I'm out every day," O'Brien said.

Dorf, a self-described introvert, found her horizons expanded online and outside. "I'm pretty good at self-entertaining" between long distance calls to family members and reading. Dorf attended Harvard Extension's virtual classes and lectures on the origins of Judaism, investments and theology, and led an online Bible study Wednesday morning with St. James Episcopal Church. She joined the church's

informal chat groups on Wednesdays and Thursdays on topics ranging from politics and religion, to the first cars participants owned. The Taylor Community's daily emailed "Linkletter" includes a list of scheduled socially-distanced activities and events, photos of birds, bridges and flowers sent in by residents, and shared links to movies, videos, recorded concerts and lectures that residents recommend to each other. And that's all in addition to those supplied by the resident life director. "You can do as much or as little as you want. Nobody pushes you to do anything," Dorf said.

When the weather and soil warm up enough to avoid frost, Dorf and Chambers will create a demonstration bed of pollinator plants, which may include bee balm, lavender, purple cone flower, marigolds, nasturtiums and zinnias.

"It's an interest in common and you're going to be doing this with other folks," Dorf said.

Chambers said interest is not building as quickly as she'd like, but she hopes numbers will grow when it's time — and increasingly pleasant — to be outside tilling soil.

Taylor responded to residents' requests for a class on exercises and stretches for gardeners — body-friendly ways to interact with raised beds and bend without hurting your back, how to lift bags by squatting and carrying them close to your body. "You not only exercise, you learn something about your body

and how it moves and works," said Dorf.

Walking the dogs

Late afternoons have become official dog-walk hour — a time for people and canines to socialize and beat cabin fever, and for people to talk about something they have in common: their dogs, their dogs' antics, and their dogs' inherent genius or astounding lack of intelligence. Dorf and her husband enjoy walking for fresh air and exercise on trails behind their house.

Because of COVID, the couple hasn't seen their 19-month-old granddaughter since she was born. But a relationship has bloomed over Apple Facetime, including with Uno, their Labrador retriever mix. "She wants to Facetime with Uno. She thinks I live in the iPad. When she sees me this summer, she's going to find out that I have more than just a head," Dorf said.

Nan Baker, 80, and her husband, Ron, formerly of Moultonborough, dove into volunteer activities over Zoom as well as some that required physical appearances — passions that will continue online and in-person beyond COVID. Ron survived and thrived during isolation by serving as chair of the building committee for the Loon Preservation Committee in Moultonborough. Nan continued to pack bags of food for the Got Lunch program on Monday mornings, where



The “Taylor Wheelies” are a group of Taylor Community residents who began biking together regularly last summer and, like their counterparts the Taylor walkers, donated money weekly to benefit the Greater Lakes Region Children’s Auction. (Courtesy photo)

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volunteers worked two to a table.

In some ways, Nan’s life continued unscathed or expanded during COVID. “I love to read, just as long as the pile of books stays nearby. In the beginning I did a lot of cleaning out closets and sorting stuff.”

She cheered from the sidelines and waved flags for a bocce-playing friend, a sport that grew along with shuffleboard on courts next to the pavilion – sports that are attracting newcomers this spring.

Family and volunteer meetings flourished remotely, but more formally and less spontaneously. Exercise classes offered respite and fitness outdoors in the pavilion. Nan joined a balance class that met Tuesday and Thursday, and will soon restart outside. “While we were doing exercise, people were working

on their garden beds” adjacent to the pavilion, which created a new ambiance for staying in shape. “The flowers came up and it was just beautiful,” she said.

Chambers is waiting for in-person visits to resume at the assisted living facility, where she volunteered serving coffee and escorted family guests to residents’ rooms. “I have so much to be thankful for in that I can do something for somebody else. I’ve made such good friends. It’s so nice to make friends with people who can’t do what you do.”

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