

# The Plant That Needs You: How Caring for Plants May Support People Living With Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease

## Tips for Seniors and Caregivers

You don't need a garden, a greenhouse, or a green thumb. One small houseplant can provide an opportunity for routine, sensory stimulation, purpose, and connection.

**The goal isn't perfect plant care. The goal is meaningful participation.**

### For Seniors

#### **Choose something meaningful.**

Pick a plant that reminds you of a favorite flower, garden, person, place, or hobby. Familiar plants may provide opportunities for reminiscence and conversation.

#### **Keep it simple.**

Start with one easy-care plant. Check the soil before watering rather than following a complicated schedule.

#### **Use your senses.**

Look closely at the leaves, feel their texture, and smell fragrant herbs or flowers. Sensory stimulation is one of the potential benefits identified in dementia research (Ramos et al., 2026).

#### **Notice the changes.**

Look for new leaves, flowers, or growth. Taking photographs or keeping a simple plant journal can turn these changes into something to anticipate and celebrate.

#### **Ask for help when you need it.**

Someone else can carry the watering can, move the plant, or help with instructions. You can still be the person who cares for it.

#### **Tell the stories.**

Let your plant remind you of gardens you've had, people you've loved, or things you used to grow. There is no need to remember everything perfectly.

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## For Caregivers

### **Invite—don't take over.**

Instead of "I'll water the plant," try **"Would you like to water it with me?"** Preserving choice and participation can make the activity more meaningful.

### **Follow their interests.**

A former gardener might enjoy growing vegetables or flowers. Someone who loved cooking might enjoy herbs. Choose something connected to their life.

### **Don't turn it into a memory test.**

Ask open-ended questions such as, *"What flowers did you used to grow?"* rather than testing whether they remember a plant's name.

### **Let mistakes happen.**

Overwatering, forgetting, or breaking a leaf isn't failure. Simply redirect: *"Let's see what the plant needs today."*

### **Adapt the activity.**

Use lightweight pots, small watering cups, raised containers, or tabletop gardens when mobility or strength is limited.

### **Keep safety in mind.**

Choose non-toxic plants when possible, especially if there is a possibility of tasting leaves or flowers. Keep fertilizer, pesticides, sharp tools, heavy pots, and electrical equipment safely out of reach when necessary.

### **Do it together.**

Sometimes the greatest benefit isn't the gardening at all. It's sitting beside someone you love, noticing a new leaf, sharing a story, and having something living to care for together.

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## Remember

Plant care is a **supportive activity—not a treatment for dementia or Alzheimer's disease.**

Research is promising for mood, engagement, psychological well-being, social connection, and caregiver well-being, while evidence for directly improving cognition remains mixed (Wang et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2025; Ramos et al., 2026).

**The goal isn't to grow the perfect plant.**

**The goal is to grow moments of connection.** 

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