

Activity: Creative Expression Goal: Social Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Kentucky Derby’s Run for the Roses & Flower Crowns

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Materials

Sample flower crown

18-gauge Rustic wire for flower crown, scissors, pruners, everlasting (dried) or fabric flowers, ribbon, feathers, floral tape

Red spray roses, mint sprigs

Optional: head band, trophy

Mirror, pre-printed Derby facts, photos that showcase common Derby sights like horses with garlands, Derby hats

Pre-cut horse shapes, pens



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will celebrate the Kentucky Derby, its rose connections & fabulous headwear by making a flower crown.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Practice strategies for distracting from pain or boredom; expand knowledge about celebrations that include & combine flowers & fashion

Physical: Exercise hand dexterity & fine motor skills; increase walking exercise; increase visual focus for task completion

Psychological/Emotional: Practice self-regulation by selecting only the number of flower stems as directed

Sensory: Use tactile sense to complete task; engage all senses during session

Social: Share materials with others; listen attentively when others speak; engage with others in pro-social manner

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials. Place a trophy on the table for participants’ arrival as well as flowers to be used in the session. Make a sample floral crown. Form rustic wire into flower crown bases, enough for all participant. Pre-cut horse shapes & flower stems to about 3” length. Print out Derby facts & photos of Derby sights.
2. Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants to the Kentucky Derby horse race celebration which will include a few plant-forward activities. Asking participants if they watch the big horse races or have preciously ridden or owned horses can begin social interactions within group. Pass around Derby photos & discuss key observations.
3. Facilitator brings out a sample flower crown, putting it on their own head & introducing this as the first activity each person will make. Working in teams of two, adjust Rustic wire to fit securely around each person’s head as the base frame for attaching flowers (see notes below). Headbands can be substituted. Pass a red rose to each person, smelling, touching & enjoying it prior to putting it in floral crown.
4. Assemble a small bouquet using about 3 stems of fabric or everlasting dried flowers (see below), decorative feathers & red roses. Lay the stems of the small bouquet parallel to the Rustic wire & attach using floral or masking tape. Repeat, balancing flowers on both sides.
5. Attach ribbon & “finish” the wire frame with floral tape.

6. Invite participants to wear their flower crowns. Pass around a mirror so participants can see their handiwork. Consider a parade through the facility sharing the Derby crowns with staff & others, while increasing physical exercise.
7. Sprigs of mint can be passed to each person, simulating mint juleps as the party begins. Asking participants to suggest [fun horse names](#) can stimulate conversation & laughter, as can facilitator-led [fun facts](#) (these can be pre-printed & distributed to participants to read & share aloud).
8. Make-believe horses made from cardboard (head or body), or plastic figures can be slid across table like a race. Shouting for a favorite horse is allowed, betting discouraged!

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: The symbol of the blanket of red roses draped over the winner of the Kentucky Derby horse race dates back to 1896 and is a beautiful display of flowers used in celebrations. Using this as a springboard for a TH session for all types of populations including wellness, seniors, youth, mental health, rehabilitation, or other specialized populations can provide for a variety of therapeutic goals from distraction from pain or boredom, use of arthritic hands manipulating the flowers onto the crown, increased visual focus creating the headpiece, or self-regulation implementation restricting self to the number of materials recommended by the facilitator.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Some participants may find floral wire sharp; gloves can be provided or wire can be pre-cut. Facilitator should be sensitive to allergies to some plant materials, and propensity of some to put items in mouths (some plants may be toxic).

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Run for the Roses Kentucky Derby is steeped in tradition including a post-Derby party in the 1800s where ladies were given red roses, making it the official flower of this horse race. Today the garland is made of more than 400 red roses sewn onto a green satin backing. Headwear like hats and [fascinators](#) as well as dandy outfits are part of the Derby. Creating floral crowns for this TH session brings some of the celebratory aspects to whatever setting the session is being held at. [Mint juleps](#) could be served but most facilities do not allow alcoholic beverages, this also poses some health considerations. Sticking to mint sprigs to smell or incorporate into flower crowns, or non-alcoholic mint juleps with muddled mint leaves and water-based simple syrup with sugar minus the bourbon may be appropriate. Parading and modelling floral crowns can be part of the session, increasing physical exercise walking about, and providing staff and others with a fun parade.

Flower crowns can be made with [everlasting flowers](#), described by Susan Morgan, THP, as “flowers that hold their shape and color even after they have dried... recommended are 'Million Star' baby's breath with large flower heads, strawflowers, goldenrod, yarrow, and preserved and dyed eucalyptus... Some participants didn't want to make a [Derby] crown so they made bouquets, floral arrangements, or mini wreaths. Don't forget to bring a handheld mirror so that participants can look at themselves wearing their handmade crowns!” (Morgan, 2015). If spray roses are out of budget, statice or greens can be suitable alternatives.

Other horse races have plant and flower themes. [THADs Stargazer Lilies](#) at the Kentucky Oaks (Supports Breast Cancer Awareness), and Black-Eyed Susans @ the Preakness Stakes provide additional ideas and TH activities.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Hanlon, R. (2025). [We're off to the races with 45 fascinating Kentucky Derby trivia questions and fun facts to know.](#) Parade.com.
- Keith, J. (2023). [Effortless everlasting cut flowers for crafting.](#) Fafard.com.
- Morgan, S. (2015). [More therapeutic horticulture programming ideas for spring \(Kentucky Derby floral crowns\).](#) Eat|Breathe|Garden.com

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.