

Activity: Creative Expression Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Love & Heart-Shaped Leaves

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Photo by Gardenia.net



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will make art using heart-shaped leaves. Note: Some plants mentioned in this THAD are poisonous.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Use creative expression as part of intervention; create art in memory of loved ones; expand hort knowledge

Physical: Practice handwriting addressing dysgraphia challenges

Psychological/Emotional: Address socially appropriate expressions of love, devotion, types of love; identify coping mechanisms for self-regulation challenges related to love

Sensory: Use visual, tactile & olfactory senses creating art

Social: Create a group artwork using plant materials; work cooperatively in groups; practice skills for social awareness, social emotional learning

Materials

Heart-shaped leaves

Paper, banner paper, pencils, paints, brushes, tape

Gloves, wipes

Photo: Sweetheart plant (*Hoya kerrii*)

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

- Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials. Determine if poisonous plants will be included in session.
- Facilitator begins session by asking group to define healthy love. Present heart-shaped plant leaves.
- Depending on session's focus (vocational, educational or social), facilitator uses one of the four activities described below. One or two therapeutic goals would be integrated into the session.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:

Discussing love, healthy relationships, and how to express love to friends, family or partners is a topic that has implications for behavior, thoughts, verbal

communication and societal mores. These span multiple health domains from physical affection or outbursts, sensory interactions, psychological and emotional challenges and rewards, as well as social functioning, good and not as good. Different ages and populations will be interested in different aspects of love – dating, friendship, marriage, overbearing toxic relationships, sexuality, love in old age, love when in isolation (jail, hospital, military), or sexual misconduct. The facilitator can apply any number of applications and therapeutic goals depending on the populations or individuals.

Several TH activities can be incorporated into this theme of love, using plant materials, specifically heart-shaped leaves. Whether the leaves themselves are used, or they are the template for leaf printing, tracing or painting, they provide several platforms for sessions that may have serious discussion or focus, but which can provide more light-hearted, creative expression. Some examples:

Tracing leaf heart-shapes: Physical challenges related to hand functioning for children, stroke patients, people with cerebral palsy or other medical conditions can be treated by tracing leaves with interesting shapes. Leaves

can be held in place with tape. Leaves can be pre-traced by facilitator to be re-traced by participant (with live leaf on view), and hand grip accommodated with larger diameter pencils or brushes.

Printing/Painting heart-shaped leaves: [Printing leaf shapes](#) on cards or fabric using non-toxic paint can then be used as gifts, tokens of affection, appreciation or expressions of love. Psychological goals could include addressing self-dysregulation when expression of love is not socially acceptable, or [showing gratitude](#) to others.

Creating a large mural or artwork: Working in a group, participants can take turns placing real, fabric or paper heart-shaped leaves on a mural. Social goals: working cooperatively; tolerance of others; social emotional learning for children and adults; seniors/dementia participants working towards improving relationships in communal living facilities; mental health support groups using creative expression as a lighter part of treatment sessions, or bereaved populations remembering their loved ones in this art form.

Identifying toxic heart-shaped leaves: A horticultural focus can incorporate vocational exploration, plant identification appropriate for some populations like corrections, youth, or veterans who may be expanding skills in horticulture or cognitive skills. Facilitator needs to determine ahead of time what is appropriate for groups.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Depending on populations, some toxic plants may be introduced, as vocational or horticultural training with the primary point being identification of toxic plants. Populations with propensity for putting items in mouths should not use poisonous plants, need to be monitored closely, and materials selected so that no safety issue is present. Poisonous plants with heart-shaped leaves: Redbud* (*Cercis canadensis*), Heartleaf philodendron* (*Philodendron cordatum* or *P. scandens*), Pothos* (*Epipremnum aureum*), English Ivy* (*Hedera helix*), Cyclamen* (*Cyclamen persicum*), and Anthurium* or Flamingo flower (*Anthurium andraeanum*) among others.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

Outdoor Plants with Heart-shaped Leaves	Indoor Plants with Heart-shaped Leaves
Taro (<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>) has large leaves with distinctive veining; if eaten raw can be poisonous.	Sweetheart plant (<i>Hoya kerrii</i>) slow-growing evergreen vine, has bright green foliage and star-shaped fragrant flowers.
Katsura tree (<i>Cercidiphyllum japonicum</i>) is a large specimen often 50 ft tall, with scalloped edged leaves, some with a sweet scent.	Oxalis (<i>Oxalis acetosella</i>) plant leaves are perfect little hearts in 3 sets, that can be eaten, are tart in flavor, can be green, red, or purple and are nyctinastic, folding up at night.
Littleleaf Linden (<i>Tilia cordata</i>) has dark green leaves with fragrant flowers blooming in summer.	Heart Fern (<i>Hemitomis airfolia</i>) with deep green heart-shaped leaves has fuzzy black petioles.
Catalpa (<i>Catalpa speciosa</i>) with large orchid-like white flowers in spring, has broad ovate oblong leaves light green to yellow green.	Some lime leaves and rose leaves have the basic shape of a heart if a bit of a change happens at the top of the leaf.
Sweet potato (<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>) leaves and tubers are edible, with many varieties available.	
Plantain (<i>Plantago major</i>) has medium green leathery elliptical lanceolate leaves (North Carolina State Extension, n.d.).	

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Haynes, C. (2022). [All hearts](#). Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Fleming, L. (2023). [TH activity plan – Leaf prints](#). University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database.

Fleming, L., & Creus, E. (2024). [TH activity plan – Cultivating gratitude](#). University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database.

North Carolina State Extension. (n.d.). [Plantago major](#). NC Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.

North Carolina State Extension. (n.d.) [Cyclamen persicum](#). NC Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.

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.