

Greenhouse work best 'therapy'

Before coming to the greenhouse, one patient's "programming" consisted of sorting plastic hoops in Building 61. He often left his work to punch and curse at other patients, staff recall. Now he has learned to stroll quietly from the begonias to the coleus, concentrating on emptying his watering can.

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

One of the first things a visitor notices about the wards of Willowbrook is the echoes. The echoes blast off the hard terrazzo floors and get lost in the huge halls and dormitories. But the greenhouse is different, a cozy refuge for 20 mentally retarded patients.

Tucked into a northern corner of the 400-acre campus, where untamed weeds and shrubs make it nearly invisible, the greenhouse is a rural hideout on the open grass tract of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

Its twin glass-covered alleys are a test tube for theories about the way environment affects be-

havior. Personalities seem to change when they're transplanted from the red brick pre-World War II institution to the intimate light of the greenhouse.

The six-person staff works to calm patients who go on screaming jags, sit and rock for hours or throw any breakable object in sight. In a "remarkable" number of cases, patients have improved, according to Phyllis Sanftner, a greenhouse supervisor.

Before coming to the greenhouse, one patient's "programming" consisted of sorting plastic hoops in Building 61. He often left his work to punch and curse at other patients, staff recall. Now he has learned to stroll quietly from the begonias to the

coleus, concentrating on emptying his watering can.

"It doesn't mean we have cured them," Mrs. Sanftner said. "But the crowding here is not as noticeable as in the other programs. The clients seem to thoroughly enjoy the atmosphere."

Under the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a 1975 federal court order, the state is required to give its mentally retarded patients six hours each weekday of constructive activity—therapy, recreation or work, sometimes for nominal pay.

In past years, greenhouse alumni have left the institution to live in the community and hold down jobs as landscape laborers, Mrs. Sanftner said.

But the patients today are harder to train. In six years the institution's population has dropped from about 4,000 to about 900, as the state opens court-ordered group homes. Many capable patients have gone, leaving behind the severely and profoundly retarded.

Some staff fear that as the state phases down Willowbrook it will close the greenhouse, in favor of more conventional therapy like sorting screws.

Victor Bellini, a teacher, protests that the greenhouse fosters independence.

"These clients have been taken care of all their lives. So this type of program really affords them the opportunity to take care of something else, which is alive," Bellini said.

"I guess self-esteem is what the program accomplishes," he added. "Something else needs them."



A resident sprays young potted flowers.

residents ever had