

How important is access to nature for seniors? We asked Dr. Susan Rodiek, a Texas A&M professor of Architecture, about her research findings and solutions!

"There's a lot of research that shows spending time outside can have major health benefits for older people," Rodiek said. "If a facility resident goes outdoors for even five or ten minutes a day, it can greatly benefit health, mood, sleeping patterns, hormone balance, and vitamin D absorption. Unfortunately, the physical environment is not typically designed to support residents' desire to go outdoors – the problems may be easy and inexpensive to fix, but often they are not recognized by staff and administrators."

Some of the barriers are physical, such as uneven paving or doors that are hard to open, and some are psychological, Rodiek said.

"Some residents feel like when they're out there, they're cut off from everyone," she said. "And some of the people who work at these facilities feel like it is too dangerous to allow them outside. It is hard to break through those perceptions."  
*(excerpt from an interview with Texas A&M outreach)*

Rodiek's research also showed that facilities with well-planned outdoor spaces had a higher number of family visits. "If you have a comfortable, safe, accessible, and beautifully designed space, you're going to see residents and their families visit those spaces more often," says Rodiek.

*(excerpt from an interview with NCAL Focus – National Center for Assisted Living)*

The "Access to Nature" videos were developed from these research findings. They feature current research findings in gerontology, psychology, and design, as well as comments from residents themselves, providing planners and designers with guidelines for creating outdoor spaces seniors will use. The series also helps avoid pitfalls, such as "invisible" barriers, which prevent easy access to outdoor features. *(excerpt from an interview with Texas A&M outreach)*

### **Award-winning "Access to Nature" videos show ways to encourage outdoor usage**

By Dr. Susan Rodiek, a Texas A&M professor of Architecture

A set of educational videos has been developed to illustrate practical ways to plan, design, and manage senior communities to encourage residents to spend more time outdoors. Because research has found substantial health benefits from contact with nature, most facilities provide usable outdoor areas – however, they are often found to be sadly under-utilized. Research conducted over the past 15 years by the Center for Health Systems & Design at Texas A&M University has found that the majority of elderly

residents have great interest in going outdoors, but are often discouraged by design issues, such as the lack of abundant green plants, poor paving, or inadequate seating.

Dr. Susan Rodiek, a Texas A&M professor of Architecture, led a multi-regional research project funded by the National Institute on Aging. Collecting information from nearly 2,000 residents and staff through focus groups, surveys, and photo comparisons, the research team learned what outdoor features residents preferred, and what barriers they faced in trying to spend time outdoors in comfort and safety. The result is an educational program that condenses all the most important information into three 30-minute videos, with additional readings and resources online. This program has won top national awards from the Center for Excellence in Assisted Living (CEAL), the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), and the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA). The program is also certified for continuing education credit by the ASLA and AIA (American Institute of Architects).

The videos use a fast-paced combination of real-world examples, design sketches, photos, diagrams, 3-D animations, and brief interviews with residents and experts to clearly show how these cost-effective concepts can be applied. The research-based ideas are equally important for facility administrators, activity directors, architects and landscape architects, policy-makers, educators, and consumer advocates. The videos work together to cover the main aspects of the topic; each is suitable for a half-hour brown-bag lunch-and-learn session. DVD-1 showcases research on the health benefits of being outdoors for seniors, DVD-2 focuses on the indoor-outdoor connections, and DVD-3 addresses the outdoor spaces themselves. The DVDs are available at [www.accesstonature.org](http://www.accesstonature.org).