In Lockdown, Discovering Gardening’s Restorative Powers

To combat the anxiety and cabin fever stirred up by the coronavirus pandemic, many people are finding it therapeutic to work in the soil, plant seeds and watch things grow.

By Anne Marie Chaker
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Jessica Wallans copes with the anxiety and cabin fever from the coronavirus pandemic by heading outdoors to her vegetable bed.

She and her 3½-year-old son Jasper “are in the garden at least two times a day,” Ms. Wallans says. “It has become our place, where Jasper can get dirty and shovel rocks. For me, tending to plants and watching the spinach seedlings grow has become an increasingly therapeutic act.”

The lockdown has sparked a new appreciation for the benefits of gardening. Parents looking to tend neglected corners of the yard—while keeping their children occupied for a precious 20 minutes at a time—are discovering the vegetable patch. “We’ve all had to hit the pause button and get away from our screens,” says Bridget Behe, horticultural marketing professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Mich. “Getting your hands in the soil, planting seeds, watching things grow, tasting edible plants you’ve grown is all sensory. It’s
emotionally gratifying.” Sharing that with children can not only teach biological concepts but also can be a bonding experience, she says.

Many members of AmericanHort, a Columbus, Ohio-based trade group representing greenhouse growers, nurseries and retailers, posted record-setting March sales, spokeswoman Mary Beth Cowardin says. Home Depot, Lowe’s and other big chains say it is too early to report sales that may have been affected by the pandemic. However, as people working from home tackle their to-do lists, “one of the emerging projects has been planting seeds for at-home fruit and vegetable gardens,” according to Lowe’s spokeswoman Amy Allison.

Shrub Bucket, of Ithaca, N.Y., which delivers plants to 17 states, says it had 2,023 orders last month compared with 57 in March of last year. “Any time there’s an economic downturn, gardening goes up,” says Heidi Mortensen, who co-founded the online business in 2015.

![Fruit from bushes at Bushel and Berry, a supplier that saw sales surge during the first quarter.](https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-lockdown-discovering-gardenings-restorative-powers-11587898807?mod=djemHL_t)

Westgrove, Pa.-based Bushel and Berry says blueberry, raspberry and blackberry bushes sold during the first quarter at a clip of 1,200 a week, up from 500 a week during the same period last year. “We’ve already sold out,” says manager Layci Gragnani. Seed company Renee’s Garden of Felton, Calif., says Monday-morning orders have topped 2,000 in recent weeks, up from around 300 in a typical spring. Normally, an online order is fulfilled within a day, but the staff is so backed up, fulfillment now takes seven working days, says founder Renee Shepherd.

A few weeks ago, Ms. Wallans, a Portland, Ore.-based manager of a sportswear company, turned to gardening, when she and her husband Mike found themselves working from home while caring for Jasper. Her husband built the vegetable beds back in 2018, but Ms. Wallans always felt stretched for time to garden until the lockdown prompted her to seek out activities to do with Jasper nearby. “Putting him in front of the TV wasn’t going to cut it,” she says. In mid-March “our world changed by bringing us 100% into our home,” Ms. Wallans says. “No more commute, no more school drop-offs.”
She and Jasper recently planted celery, carrots, leeks and kale.

Working in the garden doesn’t only teach biology and science, says Maree Gaetani, director of strategic initiatives at KidsGardening, a Burlington, Vt.-based garden education nonprofit largely funded by horticulture companies. “It’s a way to appreciate the slowness of life. When you plant something it changes the way you look at the natural world.”

Laura Kurz turned growing vegetables indoors into a science experiment with her children, Charlie, 11, and Clara, 8. In late March, Ms. Kurz’s husband Ken picked up a dozen packets of seeds at Walmart and the family planted 11 trays of tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers and basil. They placed the trays on a ledge in the master bathroom with a skylight overhead, which is “a perfect incubator,” says Ms. Kurz, a special events coordinator in Chadds Ford, Pa. Charlie and Clara help water the plants, which the family will transfer outdoors in a few weeks to a new raised bed they ordered online.

“We’re not at the point yet where we need to get chickens and have a farm in the backyard,” Ms. Kurz says. “We are just trying to make things as normal as possible.”
Clara says she and her mom chat about which seeds have sprouted. “I like that we can watch them grow and see what happens in a month or two,” the third-grader says.

Research shows that gardening or being around plants has physical and psychological benefits, says Charlie Hall, a horticulture professor at Texas A&M University who has analyzed more than 2,000 studies, albeit small ones, usually with 50 subjects or fewer.

One 2016 Korean study compared 24 women over age 70 who participated in twice-weekly gardening sessions to 26 women of similar age who didn’t. After 15 sessions over two months, researchers found that the women who gardened showed significantly improved muscle mass, aerobic endurance, hand dexterity and less feelings of depression than the control group.

Washington attorney Julia Graff recently started growing beets, carrots and snow peas in a raised bed she built a few weeks ago with her husband, Brad Leneis, 38, also a lawyer. She enlisted their daughters, Amery, 6, and Lucinda, 2, in the project.

Initially, gardening held their interest. “Now it’s basically me watering it,” she says. “Their ability to dig a hole is somewhat limited.” But the vegetable patch has become a way for her to decompress and get outdoors while her children putter nearby. “They’re out there with me, and if they run off and do something else, that’s fine. Eventually they come back to it.”

In Portland, Ms. Wallans says gardening lends itself to storytelling with her...
son. “We have been talking about the job of worms,” says Ms. Wallans. “At first he thought they were ‘yucky.’ But yesterday was the first time he held a worm and looked at it.”

Write to Anne Marie Chaker at anne-marie.chaker@wsj.com