

Psychological Benefits of Gardening

In the last few months, much of America has spent more time at home due to stay-at-home orders and the closure of schools. Social isolation and worry can have a negative impact on mental health leading to symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as disrupted sleep patterns. Across the country, we have seen many people turn to gardening as a way of spending time, alone or together with family, during the pandemic. There are many psychological benefits to gardening and spending time among plants. Just being in a green space or around trees and plants has been shown to alter EEG recordings and reduce feelings of anger, fear, and sadness. Gardening teaches of patience and compassion. In the garden, things are always changing, and we learn that many things are not in our control and we must adapt to them.

Mindfulness

The practice of mindful meditation is growing in the United States. In Mindful Meditation, an individual is encouraged to “be in the moment” by slowing their thoughts and focusing on the environment and on sensations as a way of calming overwhelming emotions. Spending time in the garden is a perfect method for practicing this. When you are sitting in the garden, you can focus on the light and shade as it moves across the plants, on the different colors hitting your eyes, on the feel of grass against your hands or feet, and by watching the clouds. The point is to deeply relax and to focus for 5 to 10 minutes on breathing and on the five senses, not on negative thoughts or the past or future.

Reducing Stress

When we are feeling stressed out, we become tense, have difficulty sleeping, and are more irritable. An excellent way to reduce tension and stress in the body and mind is to do repetitive, rhythmic, physical movements. Research has shown that rhythmic movements, with both hands, can significantly reduce anxiety and can induce a calmer state. Weeding, digging, potting plants, watering, mowing the yard - all of these include rhythmic movements that can help to calm and sooth us when we are feeling anxious. Try to engage in the activity for at least 10 minutes at a time.

Physical Health

The physical health benefits of gardening are well known. Gardening has been shown to reduce blood pressure, improve heart health, decrease the risk of Alzheimer’s, and improve overall

longevity. Physical activity also has the added benefit of improving mental health. When you are more physically active in the garden, you sleep better. Stress and anxiety can increase adrenaline and working in the garden can burn off this excess adrenaline. Physical activity also releases endorphins that give us a boost of mild euphoria that can improve your mood. The added exercise can help us to lose weight which also can help improve self-esteem.

Spending Time with Others

For those of us with children, spending time in the garden is a way of bonding with your children that can be invaluable. My mother is in her mid-80's and she can remember fondly of the time she spent with her grandmother in the garden during her childhood in Pennsylvania among the Hollyhocks and Gladiolas. Spend time with your children in the garden. You can help nurture a love of nature that will last them a lifetime as well as spending time together that is unrushed and does not involve electronic devices. Community gardening can help build relationships and feeling of social connection with others.

Hope in a Better Future

For thousands of years our ancestors have farmed, herded, hunted, and gathered. As human beings, we were meant to spend large amounts of time outside. Studies have shown that our brains react to landscape scenes and that being under trees creates a sense of calm. The one thing that our ancestors knew, and those of us who garden understand, is that gardening comes with a profound sense of hope. The farmer, when he looks over the field is content with what he sees but in the back of his mind is the thought, "Yes, but next year it will be even better". Hope for the future is intrinsic in gardening, sometimes you must wait years to see the literal fruits of your labor. We learn patience in the garden, and humility, and hope. There is an old Arabic proverb that states, "If you are planting a tree and the end of the world comes, finish planting the tree", this proverb alludes to the fact that we don't plant for us but for those who will come after us. Another story relates that a king rode by an old man planting a fruit tree, he told the man "You will never see the benefits of this tree, you will die before it bears fruit" the man replied, "Our fathers planted so we will receive the benefit just as we plant so our children will have the benefit of what we planted." The king was so impressed with the man's wisdom that he gave the man gold. The man replied, "See, this tree has already benefitted me".

In conclusion, gardening has many psychological and physical health benefits. In these times gardening can take on special meaning when many things in the world can seem out of control. Spending time in the garden and doing the daily tasks that all gardens require can help to heal us both in body and in mind. So, walk out in the garden, breathe deeply, be in the moment, and genuinely enjoy.