

April 28, 2018  
Garden Column

Rewards of Gardening  
Dr. Robert Nyvall  
[rfnyvall@gmail.com](mailto:rfnyvall@gmail.com)

Every New Years, many of us commit to exercise more, eat only food that's more nutritious, and live a healthier lifestyle. Almost a quarter of the year has passed and we have seen countless ads for fitness equipment and gear, pills and plans to reduce weight, and inspirational talks to improve our mental health and outlook. However, there's an activity that can increase strength, provide a cardiovascular work out, increase flexibility, relieve stress, improve mental health, and provide nutritious food. And you don't have to buy an expensive piece of equipment or plan to accomplish these goals. No surprise; this wonder activity is gardening.

April is often called the "cruellest month" with it's fluctuating cold and warm temperatures, capricious weather, and somber overcast skies. April is also "National Garden Month", an anticipation of the halcyon days of summer when we can actually leave winter doldrums behind and get out to our gardens. Connecting to nature and growing your own flowers and food is an obvious benefit of gardening but the secondary benefits of physical exercise and mental health can be argued to be an even more important reward.

Hectic work schedules and constant use of electronic gadgets cause us to tune out what's around us. Gardening connects us with nature and the rhythm of life. As important as the physical benefits are, gardening also improves general mental health. Putting one's hands in the soil to plant, weed, and harvest produce you have grown speeds healing from substance abuse, reduces depression and anxiety, and promotes positive thinking and inner tranquility. By forcing us to slow down, gardening teaches us to live in the here and now, in "garden time".

Stress is hard on the body, causing irritability, headaches, stomach aches, and heart attacks while worsening pre-existing conditions. Studies have shown that just looking at a garden reduces stress with attendant psychological benefits. We may not have time to take long nature walks, but we can spend a little time looking at a garden.

Researchers compared outdoor gardening to indoor reading for stress relief. Gardening resulted in significantly reduced cortisol levels, a hormone released in response to stress, more than reading. Gardening therapy, sometimes referred to as horticultural therapy, for elderly and people with

dementia resulted in better sleep patterns, improved mental well-being, and enhanced overall functioning.

Gardening requires you to be creative. The time spent planning the garden and researching different plants is a great brain workout. Personally, I see colors and patterns in a garden that can only be compared to an impressionist painting. The altered hues, shades, and tints change daily, creating an expectancy for even the most experienced gardener.

The Center for Disease Control compares gardening to a moderate cardiovascular exercise routine. Think of the garden as an outside gym where 30 to 45 minutes a day can burn 150 to 300 calories. This isn't just standing while watering the flowers but by using the whole body to dig, plant, weed, and water. The resulting stretching, pushing, pulling, and lifting incorporates multiple muscles that improve a gardener's overall fitness level and helps to prevent heart disease, obesity, adult-onset diabetes, and high blood pressure. Put a gallon can full of water in each hand and you have 8 pound dumbbells and lifting a loaded wheelbarrow gives you a bicep workout; both activities important in strength training that helps prevent osteoporosis. Gardening exercise releases endorphins that make us feel good and help to create a more positive outlook on life. That good feeling stays long after the gardening is done.

Gardening connects you with people at plant sales, nurseries, and seminars. It's also a great activity for children. Give a child a section of the garden as their own and even if they won't eat carrots off their plate at the dinner table they will eat them pulled fresh from their garden soil. Some of the best lessons for children can be learned in the garden such as delayed gratification, i.e. takes time for a plant to grow and produce fruit, and don't leave a rake on the ground with the tines pointing up, i.e. safety. Students who participate in a school gardening program score significantly higher on standardized science achievement tests because they're learning in a hands on environment that's active and engaging. Gardening gets children outside and helps with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder associated with lower levels of sunshine.

Gardening provides fresh fruits and vegetables and the encouragement to eat them. Strawberries are sweeter when you grow them yourself and a few home grown tomatoes is an impetus to try a new recipe. Fresh herbs from the garden enhance the flavor of foods thereby reducing the use of salt and sugar and most are easy to grow, one of the best ways to begin gardening.

When you grow your own food you have control over what pesticides or fertilizers are used. Most produce in a grocery store comes from afar and is often treated with pesticides. Although washing removes much of the residue

there is always a lingering uncertainty as to how much remains on the plant. Gardening gives the option to apply organic fertilizers and natural pesticides and the opportunity to harvest foods at their peak, allowing them to accumulate nutrients that might otherwise be lost when foods are picked unripe for easier shipping. If we are what we eat, choosing, growing, and harvesting our own fruits and vegetables makes us likely to eat more of them.

Gardening can be an enjoyable activity for the whole family, but the sun, heat, and unwelcome insects can cause not-so-enjoyable repercussions. Always be sure to wear a hat, gloves, and good shoes. Use sunscreen and be prepared for mosquitoes and other insects. Stay hydrated and take breaks as needed, especially when first beginning to garden.

Have fun gardening. Relax and remember your garden doesn't have to be picture perfect whether it's in a window box or an acre. And remember the experts at Bloomers will be glad to answer your gardening questions.

-