



WHY GARDENING IS SO GOOD FOR YOU:

TIME SPENT NURTURING YOUR GARDEN IS GREAT FOR YOUR WELLBEING.

Nothing quite lifts the spirits like seeing flowers in bloom, or the smell of rain-dampened earth after days of baking hot sunshine. "There's something about being outside and 'at one' with nature that fundamentally chimes with us as human beings," says neurologist and urban farmer Dr Maya Shetreat-Klein, author of *The Dirt Cure: Healthy Food, Healthy Gut, Happy Child* (Simon and Schuster, 2016). "Our bodies evolved with the natural world, which means we recognise all of the elements on a cellular level."

Psychologist Anna Hamer agrees. "Gardening has been shown to have a positive impact on mood and brain chemistry, with the most obvious benefit being that it allows us to get out into the fresh air and actually breathe," she says. "It's an activity that allows us to be in the moment in a world that's forever demanding we turn our attention to the next thing. Gardening – whether you're mowing the lawn or pulling up weeds – also tends to include rhythmic movement, and all of these factors are helpful in calming the nervous system. This in turn helps to make us more resilient against anxiety and stress. Taking the time to do something slowly, outside in the natural world, is especially important in large cities like London, as we are all overstimulated by noise, light and chaos on a daily basis."

Gardening gets you dirty

Gardening has also been shown to reduce depression and improve mood. "This is because dirt - or rather soil - is good for us," says Hamer. "It seems that one at least one kind of bacteria found in soil (*mycobacterium vaccae*) stimulates areas of the brain which produce the feel-good hormone, serotonin. Eating trace amounts of soil on garden vegetables seems to enable us to better cope with stress and boosts brain function, so much so that research is now being carried out to investigate whether soil bacteria could help in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

Gardening gets you moving

Spending an hour or two in the garden is also a great way to get your body moving and your heart rate up, whether you're stretching for those hard-to-reach brambles or exerting near-Herculean effort winding in the garden hose. "Being active is important for weight management and heart health," says Jules Payne, chief executive of charity Heart UK. "You don't have to commit to running marathons – simply moving more all adds up." Remember too that physical activity significantly improves digestion (the body needs to move to stimulate healthy bowel function) and that being outdoors on sunny days helps top up our vitamin D levels, which is essential for healthy bones, teeth and muscles.

Gardening boosts your mood

There is research to suggest too that 'eco therapies' such as gardening can be as effective as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression and anxiety. In a study into the benefits of ecotherapy, mental health charity Mind found that 94 per cent of people said that green exercise activities had benefited their mental health, and that nine out of 10 people who took part in green exercise activities said that the combination of nature and exercise is most important in determining how they feel. Mind's experts believe it's because gardening provides a very effective alternative to traditional exercise, done in an outdoor environment, and that it increases regular social contact with other people, helping to reduce loneliness and boost self-esteem. Indeed, it's easy to see how the colours, sounds and smells we find outdoors stimulate our senses and boost our wellbeing in a way that the gym or urban environments simply can't.

Gardening connects you with nature

It's not just looking at your beautiful blooms is beneficial, either. If you grow your own vegetables, you're likely to be more mindful about what you put on your plate, and veggies are full of vitamins, minerals and beneficial bacteria from the soil that both nourish and support the body.

Last but not least, caring for a garden is profoundly satisfying. "The process of nurturing a garden or allotment provides the satisfaction of completing tasks and a stronger connection with the natural environment," says Hamer. "Both are associated with improved self-esteem and decreased levels of anger."

By Claire Lavelle, commercial health writer

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