

Thoughts on Gardening and Health

By Susan Camp

As a registered nurse in the 1980's, I developed an interest in what were then known as "alternative therapies." By the 1990's, the term "complementary therapies" had eclipsed the earlier term, and by the turn of the 21st century, that phrase had quietly morphed into "integrated modalities." To the basic requirements of a balanced diet, daily physical exercise, and sufficient hours of rest and sleep, we now accept as mainstream massage, aromatherapy, meditation, yoga, and other methods to help us maintain good health.

Unfortunately, many of us still spend too many hours in front of the television or computer or on our cell phones. During 2020 and 2021, working and learning via Zoom became the norm with television our primary form of entertainment.

Long before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists studied the value of spending time in nature. Continuing research demonstrates that we can improve physical health and emotional, mental, intellectual, and spiritual well-being by spending a short time each pleasant day outdoors in nature.

Did you know that gardening or even just walking outside in nature can facilitate a cascade of effects that will improve your health and well-being? An online publication from St. Luke's Health in Houston, "The Great Outdoors: 8 Ways Nature Benefits Your Well-Being" describes how exposure to the natural world can help lower your heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels. Cortisol, the so-called "stress hormone," is released by the body's adrenal glands in response to stressful events and helps to regulate the reactions of various body systems.

Walking or sitting near a water source also helps to reduce stress. Even the gentle sounds of a garden fountain can relax us and lead to a calm, meditative state.

A short period of about 10 to 15 minutes of sunlight each day will cause the skin to produce Vitamin D to help protect our bones. Overexposure to sunlight, of course, can be hazardous, so it is important to apply sunblock or sunscreen if you plan to remain outdoors longer than 15 minutes.

Exposure to the sun's rays also helps us to regulate our sleep-wake cycles. Sunlight tells specialized cells in the retina to cue the brain to release the mood-elevating hormone serotonin. Too little exposure to sunlight causes serotonin levels to drop, which can lead to what we used to call seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and is now referred to as major depression with seasonal pattern.

Some new studies indicate that the technique of "grounding" or "earthing," i.e., walking barefoot outdoors, can help reduce physical pain and inflammation.

Some other effects of spending time in nature may not be overtly apparent. The tasks of gardening connect us to the natural world, over which we have little control. Weather events, insect invasions, and plant diseases often hinder us, despite every precaution, from producing the perfect garden. From gardening, we can learn how to accept limitations and unpredictability in our lives.

If we can relinquish control of the garden to Mother Nature, we can develop a certain peace of mind. We can learn to accept occurrences we cannot change. Gardening then becomes an opportunity to change the way we do something and try for a new outcome, instead of saying, “I don’t know why this isn’t working; I’ve always done it this way.”

Gardening doesn’t suit everyone. Caring for a garden often is a frustrating endeavor. If autumn leaves on the ground drive you crazy or you have to pick up every fallen twig after a storm, you may want to adopt an activity that decreases your stress, like visiting local botanical gardens or joining nature walks to observe native plants, trees, or birds.

If you can view gardening as a process that is forever ongoing, the tasks changing with each season, you may find relaxation and time for reflection in the simple, repetitive motions of gardening chores, and you will derive many health benefits from your hours spent in nature.

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