Gardening improves the look of things

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, UK Department of Horticulture; Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience; Psychology Today

A vegetable garden can improve your health. A beautiful flower garden can improve the look of your home. But the mere act of planting and tending a garden can improve the way you look at things. After a few hours spent planting, weeding or pruning, most people have a more positive outlook, despite suffering a few muscle aches or maybe feeling tired. It’s a good tired, after all. A tired born of having accomplished something. A tired born of being in touch with nature.

The benefits of time spent outdoors in a garden are many.

Stress melts away in a garden. Whether it’s the fresh air or the sun or the birdsong or just the physical activity, studies have shown that gardening is one of the best ways to reduce stress. Go into a garden feeling a little tense, and a few whacks at a weed or clips to an unruly shrub will take care of any minor aggressions you’re feeling. Don’t take it out on your family, take it out on a weed, in other words.

Gardening can help overcome loneliness. Especially now, when so many of us have to work from home and avoid socializing to reduce the spread of COVID-19, gardening can be therapeutic. Being outside in the fresh air, stretching those winter-stiffened muscles behind a rake or shovel, and reconnecting with other gardening neighbors, albeit from a safe 6-foot distance across the fence, can make you realize you’re not in this alone.

Gardening makes us feel better, because it can trigger the release of certain “happy” chemicals in our bodies, one of which is serotonin. Serotonin is a neural chemical our bodies produce that affects mood, anxiety levels, digestion, cognition and many other important functions of our bodies. Light exposure is often used as a treatment for seasonal depression, but it also seems to have an effect on other types of depression as well. Being outside in the light, even on a cloudy day, can serve to raise serotonin levels in our bodies.

Exercise, too, can boost serotonin. And researchers have discovered that Mycobacterium vaccae, a bacterium that lives in soil, also triggers serotonin release. When we turn over soil in a garden, we breathe in M. vaccae spores, which studies have shown can improve mood and cognition in mice.

Think about starting a garden this year. Large or small, in the ground or in a couple of pots, it’s hard to hold negative thoughts for too long when you’re touching earth and promoting new life.

For more information about gardening, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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