

Health

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A little digging in the dirt can do wonders for the body and mind

Did you know that gardens can be extremely therapeutic? In fact, natural environments can actually stimulate positive feelings within people while significantly reducing any negative thoughts that they may be experiencing. What's more, a garden can be enjoyed by schoolchildren, the elderly, disabled people, hospitalized patients or even people in jail! Gardens can rejuvenate us physically and emotionally, healing the body, mind and spirit. A healing garden can be anything that you want it to be and can be tailored to fit any lifestyle or budget.

According to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, the first greenhouse used for therapeutic purposes was constructed in 1879. However, the importance of natural environments to health is an ancient concept, and the use of the garden as a place for healing can be traced back to early Asian, Greek and Roman cultures. The use of healing gardens in a health care setting originated in the 12th century in monasteries and nunneries that served as the first "hospitals." Unfortunately, this ancient concept has been neglected over the last 50 years due to the rapid growth of medical technology and economic pressures related to providing health care.

Jean Larson of the Center for Therapeutic Horticulture at the University of Minnesota points out that the current focus on creating an integrated approach to medicine has resulted in a reawakening of the belief that gardens can play a significant role in the healing process. Even The Joint Commission, which accredits hospitals, said in a 1999 statement, "Parents and visitors should have opportunities to connect with nature through outside spaces, plants, indoor atriums and views from windows." Numerous studies have found that patients heal faster and require less pain medication when they are in the presence of plants. Viewing plant life also can help workers by lowering blood pressure and reducing muscle tension, thus reducing stress in just minutes.

Horticulture used as a therapeutic tool can provide the following benefits:

1. **Intellectual benefits:** Gardens can help people learn new skills and become better observers who are more curious about life.
2. **Social benefits:** Gardens can help people become more interactive by encouraging participation in garden clubs, flower shows and field trips, and through the sharing of the products of the garden.
3. **Emotional growth:** Gardening can help people focus on their strengths and abilities rather than their weaknesses. This leads to improved confidence and self-esteem, renewed interest and enthusiasm for the future and opportunities for using creativity.
4. **Physical benefits:** The physical effort needed to garden can help improve muscle coordination and train unused muscles.

Gardens called "healing gardens" are being incorporated into health care institutions of all kinds and range from small gardens to tropical rain forests. Even edible gardens are being incorporated into schools, senior living facilities and offices. An edible garden can contain herbs, seeds, berries and flowers and plants that you can eat. The garden, which can be any size, can be planted in the ground or containers. Some of the benefits of edible gardens include helping people become more focused on attaining a healthful diet; saving money; and providing enjoyment, exercise, relaxation, fresh food and an appreciation of the growing of food.

As health care costs climb and demands increase on individuals, families, employers and employees, nontraditional alternatives to healing are becoming more important. The Healing Gardens Organization (www.healinggardens.org) was created to share a passion for gardening and the use of healing gardens with those individuals and family members who are currently facing serious health challenges.

Even if you don't have the space for a grand garden, you can use one or two pots for planting. Create a healing garden for yourself and your family and watch the benefits grow.