

APRIL
2024

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The 200th Issue

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Growing Wellbeing

“We might think we are nurturing our garden, but of course it’s our garden that is really nurturing us,” wrote historian Jenny Uglow. To mark Stress Awareness Month, Newmarket garden designer Melanie Taylor explores the benefits of gardening on mental health and wellbeing

The above quote encapsulates what many gardeners have known for years – that besides being good for our physical health, gardening is an antidote to stress and the demands of a world where we are continually ‘switched on’. Celebrated US author and journalist Richard Louv has long espoused the importance of getting more ‘Vitamin N’ (nature) in our lives. A huge volume of data and research now backs this up and in recent years, the NHS has recommended ‘green social prescribing’ as an intervention to improve mental and physical health.

How gardening benefits wellbeing

There’s no doubt that gardening helps improve our physical fitness, burning around 300 calories an hour, working every muscle group, and improving fine motor skills and dexterity. But as we expend that energy, it also lowers cortisol (the stress hormone) and blood pressure, whilst boosting endorphins to improve our mood. Time in the garden helps us switch off. Homeworking during lockdown, I dealt with ‘zoom fatigue’ by snatching 10 minutes in the garden at lunchtime or between meetings. Quick tasks, such as deadheading my roses or weeding, meant I was able to refocus my mind and emerge from the garden refreshed.

Gardening is an eternally optimistic occupation, filled with hope that our seedlings will grow, and we’ll reap the benefits of our labours. As Audrey Hepburn described it, “to plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow”. It helps us to practice mindfulness by being fully present and conscious of what’s around us, noticing



The famed gardens at Sissinghurst Castle

more, and focusing our attention on the task in hand. We are literally ‘grounded’ in the present moment.

Delighting the senses

When planting a garden or designing a border, think about colour and the mood or emotions you want to evoke in different areas. A ‘hot border’ of vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows – using plants like *Kniphofia* (red hot poker) alongside *Crocsmia* and *Rudbeckia* – stimulates the senses and can feel like a warm welcome or instant ‘pick me up,’ but beware: red hues can make a garden look smaller. Sunflowers are the very essence of sunshine distilled into a seed. The perennial sunflower *Helianthus* ‘Lemon Queen’ is a good choice for long-lasting sunny borders. To create a feeling of serenity, use calming greens, pale blues, pinks, and white flowers. The cool, soft, silvery tones

of the white, green, and grey planting in Sissinghurst’s famous White Garden reflect the light with a soothing, harmonious effect.

If you want to chill out in your garden in the evening, then introduce night-scented plants, like *Nicotiana* (tobacco plant) with white flowers that shine in the moonlight, attracting moths and other nocturnal pollinators.

Plenty of plants provide a sensory experience, whether that’s the soft furry texture of silvery lamb’s ears (*Stachys byzantina*), the sweet heady scent of a ‘Gertrude Jekyll’ rose, or the herbal woody aroma of lavender baking in the sun. If your outdoor space is limited, you can plant a little sensory garden in a container. If physical gardening isn’t your thing, there are features you can incorporate into your garden that will provide relief from stress and create a restful environment



Helianthus ‘Lemon Queen’ is the plant version of perennial sunshine



Get children gardening to boost self-confidence and connection to nature

in which to relax and disconnect from the pressures of the modern world. Don't forget to incorporate calming sounds from water features and tall grasses like *Stipa gigantea*, which swish gently in the breeze.

Grow green-fingered nature ambassadors!

It's great for kids to appreciate nature at close quarters, so inspire their curiosity by creating a mindful quiet corner in the garden. Somewhere they can just sit and observe the sights and sounds of the wildlife around them, noting them in a nature journal. Construct a bee-hotel from recycled materials or let them sow wildflower seed and leave a patch of lawn unmown all year so that they can delight in the wonder of the pollinators and creatures that visit.

Help kids to grow and learn. Build a raised bed for a veg patch or flower garden of their own. If space is limited, give them a growbag, tomato plants, and a watering can. Indoors you can sow cress on cotton wool-filled eggshells or buy a piece of ginger root in the supermarket and plant it in a pot of peat-free compost. The sense of achievement from caring for and watching plants grow will help build their self-esteem.



Tactile lamb's ears are lovely to touch



Planting night-scented flowers, like *Nicotiana*, creates a calm evening garden

Why not foster a sense of community and friendly competition by getting together with your neighbours to see who can grow the tallest sunflower?

Effect of houseplants on wellbeing

If you can't get outside, then having greenery indoors can help reduce stress levels, purify the air, and create a calming environment. It's well-documented that caring for houseplants is empowering, boosts feelings of self-confidence and focuses attention.

Having plants in offices has been proven to improve productivity, sometimes – as shown by a 2014 Exeter University study – by up to 15%.

Creating a sense of belonging

For many, gardening helps combat isolation and loneliness, by increasing social connections and bonding with people who have shared interests. Whilst allotment waiting lists are long, community gardens are always looking for volunteers and there are lots of opportunities to get involved locally.

The Friends of Midsummer Common (FoMC) run a community orchard with volunteering sessions every Sunday from 10am-12pm (excluding Easter Sunday)

– see midsummercommon.org.uk. Volunteers help plant trees and wildflowers, cut grass and clear weeds in a sociable environment. Please wear sensible shoes and bring drinking water/hot drinks. The FoMC can provide all other necessary equipment. The best way to find them is via what3words.com/rabble.single.slide For a full list of Cambridge community gardens visit cambridge.gov.uk/allotments-and-community-gardens. You can also volunteer for the Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmunds by reaching out to their Friends group by email: abbeygardens.bse@outlook.com.

Nothing quite beats the feel of the sun on your face but fortunately you can garden whatever the weather. So, switch off the tech, pull on some wellies, grab your raincoat and venture outside to discover how gardening and connecting with nature really can nurture your soul.

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Reach out to Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or via the contact form on her website: hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk



Houseplants, such as this peace plant, are proven to improve mood