

Gardening as a prescription

We have discussed in this column, under Garden Therapy, the use of Sensory Gardens in hospitals and retirement homes. Gardening as a prescription for individual everyday living also has both physical and mental benefits. I have been reading about the benefits of gardening in the Sunday papers so if it is in the papers it must be true, right? Or at least fifty percent of it. Most of the news in the media of the 21st century brings us every disaster that they can gather from any part of the world and then repeats it all day in as many graphic ways as they can. So luckily today I found an article on the therapeutic effects of gardening.

One of the benefits of modern technology is that you can even garden in your bedroom in the old age home. Gardens can be horizontal or vertical or on the roof or on your small verandah. A small pot of herbs on the bookshelf, a bonsai there on the dresser and some hyacinths or orchids on the table in the corner of the room. Containers now come in all sorts of sizes. Put a few stones or hessian cloth in the bottom to give good drainage and then fill with the best quality potting soil. Do not use soil from the garden as it is too solid and dries out and does not contain enough nutrients. Mix the potting soil with some 2:3:2 fertiliser and, if you can find some, add some earthworm castings. As a final flourish mix in some vermiculite which helps retain water. If you are going to grow veggies in the container you can add some agricultural lime (dolomitic lime), which contains calcium and magnesium as most veggies like a higher level than is present in potting soil. This all sounds a bit like how the old pharmacists used to make up prescriptions for mixtures with their pestles and mortars.

The prescription for full-on gardening is to grab your gardening fork and stagger forth into the garden or allotment. Take your time and a stool or light chair (hide the old Brown Sherry under your arm until you are well out of sight of the house).

The therapeutic effects of gardening are often overlooked. It helps, for instance, with your balance. Bending, sitting, pruning and raking all help exercise the inner ear and cerebellum and can be done slowly by those with neurological and coordination disorders. The garden is a quiet place to do exercise in a place which is in good light and is safe. Apparently regular gardeners are thirty percent less likely to have falls than other adults.

Along with this goes an improvement in dexterity. Sowing seeds, pinching out buds, deadheading roses and general planting of seedlings all improve hand movements and motor skills. All these "fiddly" jobs help concentration and executive functions. One study found that, after gardening

twice a week, women developed better dexterity than a comparison with a non-gardening group.

There are also activities that are good for the soul and soil. If you are lucky enough to be in an area with a good rainfall and plenty of water in the dams, then watering the plants and shrubs with a hose is a transcendental Zen activity. You stand there and go into a fugue state and then move onwards humming a tune as you go.

Another activity that is not on the list for the next Olympic games is sweeping up leaves. The rhythm and flow of the brush on the pathways gives one a feeling of dissociation and tranquillity. There is enormous satisfaction in piling up the leaves and putting them in bags and seeing a clean pathway (this is as exciting as it gets in Pietermaritzburg). Unfortunately, in this tranquillity now comes the man with the petrol leaf blower. The loud noise of the engine and the toxic fumes that pollute the air are vexatious to the spirit.

Away from these vexatious noises and the traffic, I can also use the garden for "thinking time" and losing myself in daydreams on how I am going to spend my Lotto winnings. In this way gardening helps for depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders. A study at the University of Exeter has shown that people who live in neighbourhoods with more birds, shrubs and trees are less likely to suffer from these stress-related conditions. At a deeper psychological level, it is said that tending a plant and watching it grow keeps one in touch with the flow of life for patients suffering from chronic diseases.

We are now destroying the global biosphere on multiple fronts. Industry and traffic are changing the composition of the soil, water and atmosphere with our waste and toxic fumes. Nobody knows how much more carbon dioxide we can continue to pump into the atmosphere before our grandchildren will start to get out of breath. So Plan A is for us to start growing the green stuff in our gardens which collectively are one of the largest biospheres on the planet.

This is followed by Plan B (my grand plan) which is to take over the newspapers and the news services. I will not be giving a daily summary of all the world's disasters or political shenanigans. There will be sections on what to do in the garden today, when to plant the petunias, what birds to look out for, how to make compost and perhaps a recipe or two for tonight's supper. This news will reduce the world's intake of anxiolytics and antidepressants and help preserve the planet.

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