

### **By Mark Underwood**

*Neuroscience Researcher*

Gardening has long been known as a great way to get outdoors and enjoy fresh air and sunshine. And gardening has hidden benefits that can boost your overall health including better brain health.

You don't need a big plot of land to enjoy gardening. Use containers on a porch or patio to grow a wide variety of fruits or vegetables. A five-gallon bucket with holes for drainage can be used to grow a great crop of tomatoes.

Even if you aren't actively involved in gardening, just walking in a garden can give you a sensory experience that promotes relaxation and reduces stress.

Here are several ways gardening boosts your health and well-being.

#### **Low Impact Exercise**

Gardeners love to get outdoors and work with their hands. Because of that, gardening keeps you exercising even when a gym may not work for you.

Gardening is certainly not the same as pumping iron or running a marathon. But when you are digging, planting, and doing other tasks you have opportunities for low impact exercise.

Gardeners who do more physical work like hauling wheelbarrows of rocks or dirt get quite a workout.

No matter what level of exercise you do, gardening will help keep you limber.

#### **Stress Reduction**

When you walk among beautiful flowers and watch vegetables spring up, it's easy to see why gardening enriches the mind. But have you thought about gardening as a tonic for reducing stress? If not, you should. A recent study in the Netherlands suggests that gardening can fight stress even better than other relaxing leisure activities.

Participants in the study either read indoors or gardened for 30 minutes. Afterward, the group that gardened reported being in a better mood than the reading group, and they also had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Most of us push ourselves to the max, but gardening really does make you slow down and literally smell the roses.

#### **Tracking Your**

#### **Accomplishments**

Gardeners love to keep records. It would be difficult to remember from year to year what plants did well and those that didn't thrive in specific locations, under what conditions, and especially if you have a large vegetable, fruit and flower garden.

That's why gardeners love to keep photos of what they planted, before and after shots, and notes about their garden's progress. Since it would be difficult to remember every detail of last year's garden when you get ready to plant again this year, a photo journal along with written records can make you a more effective and efficient gardener.

Those journals are handy reviews of what to plant again and what to forego. Notes written by hand or typed on your computer will also give you another benefit. When you keep track of your gardening accomplishments, you're apt to better remember the details.

And what's more, you'll be boosting your brain health by sharpening your memory and recall skills.

#### **Mood Booster**

Gardening has proven to be a good way to change your mood for the better.

A Norwegian study followed participants with mood disorders who spent six hours a week growing flowers and vegetables.

After three months, half of the participants had experienced a measurable improvement in their depression symptoms. Even after they stopped gardening, their good moods continued three months after the gardening experiment was over.

### Eat Fresh

Growing your own food has the obvious benefit of being able to enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables. Several studies have shown that people who garden eat more fresh fruits and vegetables than people who don't have home gardens.

Growing your own garden also gives you the convenience of trying new things. You may not buy arugula at the grocery store but now that you're having success with it at home, it stretches your thinking—what else could you plant that you've never thought about before?

### Make Room for

#### Executive Function

Gardening, like many activities, can be good for you once you get going, but sometimes we all need extra motivation to accomplish our goals.

Don't blame your willpower for not getting outside and gardening. Instead, research has found that if you have poor executive decision, you may not stick to goals compared to people with excellent executive functions.

Executive function includes such things as planning and being able to thoroughly consider options in front of you, it also includes having a prospective memory. That is defined as having a sharp recall ability to remember to do things or say 'no' to other things like becoming sedentary instead of getting exercise.

The message is clear. When you take care of your brain health you will have better willpower. Cognitive performance, memory and willpower go hand-in-hand.