

## Healing in the garden

I read that people are spending more money on plants, gardening supplies, chemicals, personnel –yet fewer say they enjoy gardening. Are Americans paying more for something they do not enjoy, or are enjoying less than they once did? This confused me until I realized that a well-manicured yard is an important element in maintaining or raising property values. “Curbside appeal” costs money.

When a garden or landscape is one more area to be furnished, but with a different kind of furniture, groomed by the landscape company, it stops being a living, life-giving spot.

Some individuals look at gardening as hard work, like tilling the family farm with a plow and a mule. There is work involved in a garden, but the effort yields enormous reward! Having all labor done by professional firms is good for professionals. The act of gardening converts a chore into a delight: to see the evolution of beauty, and good eating too!

One element of creating a garden, for flowers or food, is its healing aspect. While “horticultural therapy” is an established academic discipline, with defined training and certification, the benefits of growing plants can be simple and private.

Behind my office, we established a memorial garden for two beloved staff members who passed away. At first, on that frigid January afternoon, the garden looked like a set of forlorn twigs. Now, trees have expanded, small shrubs produce flowers, and the area is a place to gratefully remember our friends.



A remembrance garden is similar to a healing garden. The term “healing garden” might sound rigid, with strict set of rules. Instead, people have expanded the notion to include many types of spaces.

It is easy to see the improvement in the well-being of those who participate and appreciate gardens when they are available. The first image of a healing garden might be at a hospital, where staff, patients and families take a moment away from its sterile confines. In fact, many hospitals have sheltered spaces with beautiful plantings and benches where people can enjoy them. Patients, who experience gardens, or exposure to a natural setting, are more likely to recover from serious illness sooner than those who do not.

Healing can take on many forms. Anyone with access to growing plants, not just those who are ailing, will benefit.

The USDA tries to convince people to eat more fruits and vegetables. Research with school children shows that “kids who grow vegetables, eat vegetables.” Now, when poor diets and lack of activity are creating a generation of obese children, it makes sense to involve them in something that is healthy on a nutritional and an action level. When they eat the lettuce they started from a small black seed, children have more than a leafy vegetable; they might have started growing healthy eating habits to last a lifetime.

Must a garden be expensive? Is patio furniture important to the horticultural experience? Healthy plants do not need high levels of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Inputs of cash cannot replace inputs of attention, nor replace the benefits the garden provides.

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