



BY RUWANTHI ABEYAKOON

Green thumbs to the rescue!

Gardening has always been touted as a recreational activity that brings immense mental and physical benefits. Buckling down at home during the pandemic saw an increase in the frequency of garden usage across the globe. Many people's physical activity levels also fell during lockdown. Gardens help people to push back against these negative effects.

Before the pandemic, the busy lifestyles did not give people the space to maintain a home garden even though the benefits were known. As people rushed to keep up with the demand of their career, life was too busy to sit in the garden and relax. However, the lockdown gave people space to reduce the mental distress of staying at home unable to go for movies, eat out or going on vacations.

No need to be an expert

Many took out their spades and rakes to grow vegetables, fruits or flowers in their home gardens. The positive thing about home gardening is you don't have to be an expert to do so. Home gardening will indeed be the solution for the escalating food prices and to ensure food security for your family.

Gardens are also places to escape the anxieties and demands of the world around us. They are particularly soothing because they are places where we can get away from our day-to-day life.

Should there be another lockdown, remember that the garden is a good space to get away from work and other people. Perhaps you can put up a corner to read your favourite book or newspaper, meditate or even listen to some good music. You will most likely feel refreshed and more productive.

Research findings

Of course, not everyone has a garden. But even if you don't have outdoor space of your own, you can still have some greenery around you. Indoor plants can be used to create a more "natural" environment and have been shown to improve mood.

According to research, Green exercise such as cycling, walking or running in woodland or countryside is another stress reliever and can boost mood and self-esteem. Walking in a park has also been shown to be revitalizing.

Home gardens can help provide variety in the diet and supply vital

vitamins and minerals, carbohydrates and proteins. Good nutrition helps the body to resist disease, so home gardens help improve family health. Home gardens flourished in Sri Lanka too during the lockdown. Many Facebook and Instagram users excitedly posted their home garden produce proving the mental satisfaction gardening bestowed.

"Home gardening has been an integral part of our lives from the days of our ancestors. People used to grow their own crops in their spacious gardens. With urbanisation and inadequate space, a trend of shopping at the supermarkets for the vegetables and fruits was observed in the past few years.

Now having understood the concerns related to food consumed, people have begun to maintain home gardens to obtain the supply of their daily fresh and healthy vegetables," retired Agriculture Instructor, K. N. K. Jayathilake said sharing insights about home gardening.

"Those who live in rural areas have more space to grow. Thus the growers aim at generating an income by selling the extra vegetables that they grow. In urban areas, people use every inch available to grow their crops such as balconies, rooftops and alleys. Container gardening and vertical gardening are some modern ways of urban gardening," Jayathilake explained.

Multiple benefits

He said that gardening can improve many aspects of mental health, focus and concentration. "Gardening improves your mood. It can make you feel more peaceful and content. Focusing your attention on the immediate tasks and details of gardening can reduce negative thoughts and feelings and can make you feel better in the moment. Just spending time around plants eases stress for many people," he said.

He added that gardening brings an array of emotional benefits. "When you see the flowers bloom it stimu-

lates happy hormones. To be in a beautiful surrounding makes people happy and content. There is also a sense of purpose and accomplishment in gardening. There are immense rewards in planting and nurturing a garden. Watching the colourful flowers grow or plucking a juicy tomato from one's own garden are satisfying," he explained.

Jayathilake said that gardening also improves attention span. "Gardening can change how well you pay full attention to a single activity. If you struggle with staying focused on tasks, conversations, or topics in your daily life, gardening can help you learn to

concentrate on what's right in front of you without getting distracted. Things like weeding, digging, and raking are a good exercise. Regular exercise reduces anxiety, depression, and other mental issues, and can help prevent dementia. Gardening also reduces depression," he said.

Sense of responsibility

Gardening is not only beneficial for adults but also for children.

School and afterschool activities may be a source of stress for children which will adversely affect their mental health. Gardening can create a sense of responsibility to help another living thing grow and thrive. Children learn to nurture the plant, give it the things it requires to be healthy until it reaches maturity.

"Gardening improves their cognitive function. It helps children develop new skills. Growing your own food is rewarding.

It helps improve the mental health of your child. Allowing your child to explore the outside world helps they be more creative. Connecting to grass, soil, trees and insects can be grounding. Being outside in fact benefits everyone.

It helps combat loneliness and isolation. Gardening can benefit your mental health by increasing social connections. Especially the elders can find it beneficial to interact with others who share the same goals and interests," Jayathilake explained.

Basic steps

He also shared a few points on how to start a home garden. "You have to focus on vegetables and fruits that everyone in your family enjoys. Rather than growing a lot from one food item, it is beneficial to grow different types of vegetables and fruits. The number of plants should be decided on the number of family members. It is wiser to grow an adequate amount for your family rather than growing excess. Choose vegetables that grow well in your area. Decide on the garden size and start small at first," he said.

"If you are not prepared to make time in your schedule to tend to your plants, you might as well buy your vegetables. Depending on the size of your plantings, time requirements may range from a few minutes per day to a full time job. Nurturing the plants is important.

When using fertiliser we should always go for natural ones such as compost or cattle manure.

To control bugs also we should turn to our traditional methods rather than depending on chemical fertiliser and pesticides. For most problems, there is an organic solution. If you are going through all the effort to grow your own food, why would you want to put toxins on it? You can obtain organic fruits, vegetables and green leaves by following the above methods," Jayathilake said.

If you are waiting to start digging and growing, it is time to do so to have some healthy, organic and fresh fruit on your family dining table.



K. N. K. Jayathilake

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