

Article on HT

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ANYONE who gardens regularly can tell you the psychological, physical and social benefits they gain from the experience. But research is beginning to confirm this, and gardening as a method for therapy is growing in popularity throughout the country.

It's for good reason. In a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), American adults reported on average that their stress level was higher than they believed to be healthy.

"Nature can be its own therapist," said Jean Larson, manager of nature-based therapeutic (NBT) services at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chanhassen, Minnesota, and professor at the Center for Spirituality and Healing at the University of Minnesota.

She refers to it as the effect of your "brain on nature," with all components firing and working together as nature intended. This engages the reptile brain (the most primitive part that includes the fight-or-flight mechanism), the mammalian brain (the part that helps create complex emotions) and the neocortex (also referred to as the human brain, the component that assists in advanced thinking).

Ultimately, she says, even five minutes in the garden provides an "opportunity for the mind to relax and shut down your internal computer." According to Larson, brain scans have also shown that the areas of the brain associated with loving and kindness become engaged, as does the creative and artistic side.

At her NBT program at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, she works with a diverse group of clients from hospitals and schools to integrate nature-based therapies for physical and psychological healing. For those with physical disabilities, the program provides adaptive tools, such as raised flower beds for stroke victims to access and an area with plants that have no fragrance for those with sensory sensitivities.

The point, says Larson, isn't the end product but the process that gets them there. For example, the program provides weed gardens for clients with dementia. "It gives them a task to complete, and it's just what the doctor ordered," Larson explained.

The Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, has an enabling garden where veterans, mental health patients and nursing-home residents, among many others, come to reduce stress and get physical exercise. Those who work with the clients see an intense transformation as the therapy progresses.

- See more at: <http://ahta.org/news/five-tips-help-kick-start-your-gardening-therapy#sthash.mO3dP2fP.dpuf>