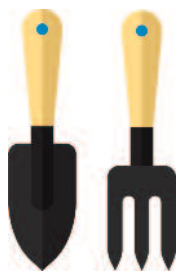


Gardening: A fun hobby that's good for your health

By Julia Haskins

Gardening may be a fun and relaxing way to get in touch with nature, but did you know that it also has plenty of health benefits? Gardening is an activity that's good for both the mind and body, and can be enjoyed by people of all ages. Plus, you get to eat the delicious fruits, vegetables and herbs that you grow. So, grab your tools and get in the dirt!

It only takes a little bit of gardening to work up a sweat. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just 2.5 hours of moderate activity each week can help



reduce the risk of many health problems, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes.

You may not think of gardening as exercise, but all the lifting, shoveling and raking involved definitely counts, says Raychel Santo, MA, senior research program coordinator for the Center for a Livable Future at the Johns

Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Your brain also benefits from time spent in the garden. Being outside in the fresh air and sunshine is an effective way to boost your mood and de-stress. In fact, gardening has shown to be helpful in reducing the risk of depression. If something is weighing heavily on your mind, gardening can allow you to focus on an activity that will bring you joy.

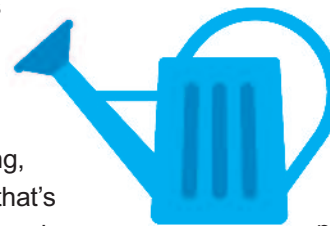
Don't forget the health benefits that come from the produce you grow.

Gardening is a simple way to get more fresh fruits and vegetables into your diet, and you're sure to appreciate them even more because you grew them.

When it comes to deciding what to plant, it may be hard to know where to begin. But if you're new to gardening, keep it simple with produce that's easy to grow. Santo recommends herbs and greens such as lettuce, kale and collards.

Santo says these foods are not only easy for first-time gardeners, they are also full of important nutrients.

Gardening is also an excellent opportunity to



>> For more healthy gardening tips, visit www.cdc.gov/family/gardening

try new healthy foods that will help you and your family become more adventurous eaters. Growing a variety of produce is as fun as it is healthy. Don't get discouraged if you don't get it right the first time.

Gardening requires some patience, but

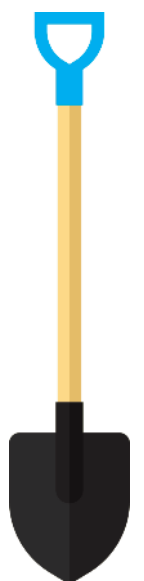
it's worth it when you get to dig into a plate of your own fresh produce.

Make sure that you have the proper tools and gear for a safe gardening experience. Santo recommends wearing light, long-sleeved shirts and pants and a hat for protection from the sun, as well as slathering on sunscreen. Wearing gardening gloves is a must to keep yourself safe when pulling weeds and carrying out other tasks that could hurt your hands. And don't forget to wear mosquito repellent.

The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons encourages gardeners to take regular breaks and drink enough water. Remember, this is exercise. The organization also suggests making the physical activity in gardening as easy as possible, from sitting on a garden stool to getting close to the objects you want to lift to reduce strain. Using a wheelbarrow is helpful for these kinds of tasks. Ask for help if something is too big or heavy to move by yourself, or if you're unfamiliar with certain tools.

Soil safety is another thing to keep in mind. Santo notes that especially in urban and suburban areas, soil may be contaminated with heavy metals and other pollutants. Soil could also have tetanus bacteria, which is why it's so important to wear gloves and stay up on vaccinations. That way, any cuts on your hands won't get infected. It's a good idea to get your soil tested before you start gardening.

Images courtesy iStockphoto: Woman by Michaelpuche; couple, Michaeljung; man and child, Rawpixel; illustrations, Colorcocktail



Gardening with children

Gardening becomes even more engaging when you bring kids into the picture. They may be focusing on the fun parts of gardening, but they're really learning important lessons, both directly and indirectly related to health.

"For kids, it's also a really hands-on nature activity," Santo told *The Nation's Health*. "They can see how science and the environment and healthy eating connect."

Provide kids with age-appropriate tools and watch over them as they explore the garden. Also give them some way to take ownership and reap the rewards themselves. Santo recommends growing a "pizza garden" with easy-to-grow ingredients for a delicious savory pie, such as tomatoes, eggplant and herbs, all in the same area.

Once the vegetables and herbs have grown, putting together the ingredients for a real pizza is a snap.

