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198 — Friday Fix: How Growing a Garden Can Reduce Your Depression

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to The Friday Fix! Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Don’t forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about how growing plants can be good for your mental health.

I’ll cover why it’s good for you and what to do to get the most benefit.

But before I do, I know some of you might be rolling their eyes at the idea of combating mental health issues like depression with gardening.
I get it.

If you told a friend you were struggling with depression and they said, “Oh you know what would help? You should start a garden,” that wouldn’t feel very good.

Sometimes, hearing things like, “Go for a walk, you’ll feel better,” sounds condescending.

But stick with me. I’m not saying starting a garden is going to cure everything. For a lot of people though, growing plants is a simple but effective way to feel better. And there’s so much science behind the idea that plants can improve your mental health that there’s an entire treatment called horticulture therapy that involves gardening as a way to improve mental and physical health.

I am not a horticulture therapist. But, I have seen the benefits of gardening first hand.

At my first job as a therapist, I worked at a community mental health center who happened to have a garden.

This organization was very much into evidence based treatment–meaning they didn’t do anything unless there was a lot of science behind the treatment. They weren’t into experimental things or treatment strategies that were a bit out there. So at first, I was surprised they were so into gardening. It seemed a little too creative and not as scientific as their other treatment strategies.

We had a variety of programs at the mental health treatment center, including a day program for adults who had mental illnesses that interfered with their ability to work and in some cases, take care of themselves.

And many of them worked in our garden. They grew vegetables and flowers.

We saw a profound change in a lot of these people. Some of them were happier. Some of them seemed more confident.
It was completely voluntary to work in the garden—but almost all of them wanted to do it.

Even the people who didn’t particularly enjoy being outside or moving around liked the garden. And people who struggled to get along with each other in a group therapy session tended to work really well together in a garden. It was fascinating to watch. But the more I learned about the benefits of gardening, the more their progress made sense.

We had a kids’ garden too for the kids who came to our office. Some of them would grow a particular plant—like they’d grow their own pumpkin. Other kids just watered the plants or enjoyed checking on how fast they were growing.

We also had a school for teenagers who were no longer able to attend public school due to their behavior—they’d been expelled. The kids—who tried to act really tough on the outside—really got into gardening.

One of them used to ask to take home some of the vegetables to give to one of his elderly neighbors. And then they decided on their own that they wanted to start a vegetable stand to sell some of the vegetables they were growing.

I would have been skeptical about whether gardening could really help people if I hadn’t seen the progress people made first-hand. But it was pretty incredible.

But what is it about gardening that helps? Is it the exercise associated with gardening? Is it the social aspect of being in a community garden where people have to cooperate and work together? Is it just being in nature that helps people?

Well, all of those things can certainly improve our health. But, people also get a boost in mental health when they’re growing an indoor plant. So perhaps it’s more about just taking care of a plant that somehow improves our emotional well-being.
In a study published this year in the journal Plos One, researchers studied women with depression and tested how gardening affected their mood.

They let women choose which treatment they wanted to try—art therapy or gardening.

At the end of four weeks, both groups showed improvement. The gardening group, however, showed a slightly bigger improvement than the art group, leading the researchers to believe that caring for plants may have a little extra healing power.

The women showed decreased depression and improved mood. They also reported less stress.

Outdoor gardening isn’t for everyone though. And for some people, it isn’t an option. Fortunately, though, growing indoor plants can also be helpful.

One study found that the bacterium in plant soil triggers a release of Serotonin in the brain, which boosts mood and reduces anxiety. So the soil from an indoor plant might be good for your mental health.

Other studies on indoor plants have found that they can reduce stress. When they tested how people’s body’s responded to being on the computer versus taking care of an indoor plant, researchers found a stark difference.

When people were working behind a computer, their body’s sympathetic nervous system was activated. Their blood pressure rose and their body’s were in a state of stress. When watering or caring for a plant, their parasympathetic nervous system kicked in, meaning they were in a state of relaxation.

The calming effect of plants is also said to boost memory retention by 20 percent. People report they can concentrate better when there’s a plant nearby.

Research has also found that plants boost creativity and productivity. In this case, you don’t even have to be the one who is growing the plant to get the benefit. Just having the plant in your office might help.
With all of that said, gardening is like everything else—it’s best in moderation. You likely know someone who has so many houseplants that all the clutter likely adds more stress. Or you know someone who constantly feels guilty that they aren’t weeding their garden enough. There are plenty of situations where growing a garden or having houseplants might take a toll on well-being.

But overall, just having a few plants around the house or growing a little container garden on your patio might be a simple but effective way to build mental strength.

When I was a kid, I used to have a venus fly trap that I loved taking care of. And I grew weird things just to see if I could do it. I grew up in Maine where the growing season is super short so I’d start growing cantaloupe plants indoors while there was still snow on the ground outside.

As an adult, I liked fun house plants too. Like I had some weird indoor version of a palm tree in Maine for a really long time.

In the years after my husband died, I grew lots of flowers outside. I think growing flowers was really helpful to getting through that time in my life.

And it’s one of the things I miss now that I live on a sailboat. I don’t have a single plant. But after talking about this, I might go get one because it made me realize I miss it.

But interestingly, in our very first episode, I talked to music producer Maffio about how he manages his mental health. And he said one of the main things he does is water his plants in his backyard. So I’m thrilled that he confirmed all this works for him too—taking care of plants helps him find inner peace.

One of the things I love about these kinds of strategies for managing mental health—there aren’t any side effects. It doesn’t cost much money. And there really aren’t any risks involved.
So if you’re someone who says I just don’t have a green thumb or I don’t know anything about gardening, I challenge you to try it anyway. It might be good for your mental health!

If you know someone who could benefit from learning how gardening or having a plant could improve their mental health, share this show with them! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course. Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who had a little greenhouse he grew some of his plants in when he was a kid), Nick Valentin.