

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

Winter 2009, Volume 2, Issue 1

In Praise of Vegetable Gardens

By Daniel Redwood, DC

Here in the Midwest, winter is the time when gardeners set aside their shovels and hoes, gaze longingly at the fallow ground so recently overflowing with flowers, fruits and bright green leaves, take a few deep breaths, and dream of springs and summers to come.

As the earth slows down and settles in for a well-deserved rest, we who seek to live in harmony with its natural rhythms have the opportunity (if we choose to carve out the time and space for it) to follow its lead. To allow ourselves those rarest of modern luxuries—the deep breath, the slow weekend afternoon, the moments of being rather than doing, of drifting rather than rushing.

I want to share a few thoughts as a gardener in winter. Not a gardening expert, mind you, just a plain old amateur gardener making the case that vegetable gardening may be the human activity that delivers more wide-ranging benefits than any other.

Consider its many gifts:

Exercise in the open air – gardening is weight-bearing exercise (good for our bones) performed in fresh air and daylight (when the sun stimulates the skin to produce Vitamin D, also good for the bones).

Optimum nutrition – the vegetables we grow in our gardens, when fresh-picked and eaten immediately, are at their absolute peak of nutritional value. They haven't spent days being trucked hundreds or thousands of miles, nor have they sat for days on a grocer's shelf. Many vitamins and other nutrients such as antioxidants start to gradually degrade soon after they are picked.

Environmentally friendly – the fleets of trucks that ship our foods across great distances burn massive amounts of fuel every day of the year. If less food is shipped, less fuel is burned. And if your garden is grown using organic methods (skipping all those petroleum-based pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers), that's one more small contribution to environmental sustainability. Out of many small changes, the big wheel turns in the right direction.

Good for the pocketbook – my experience as vegetable gardener has taught me that it's also quite good for the family budget. To give just one example, last spring I bought several seedlings of kale, chard and collards at the organic farmers market in Kansas City. They cost a little over a dollar apiece, and they provided a steady stream of fresh, delicious cooking greens for seven months. That investment of several dollars kept us supplied with super-nutritious (and *very* tasty!) greens that would easily have cost well over \$100 if purchased by the bunch at the supermarket.

There's an additional, less tangible benefit from gardening—a centering and grounding that calms the spirit. In an age when electronic and electromagnetic waves are everywhere around us, there is in all of us a deep and often unrecognized need for grounding and stability. Recall the last time you went shopping for a television or computer at one of those mega-stores where hundreds of screens are all lit up simultaneously. How did that feel? For me at least, not so great. When I'm there, I want to finish my shopping as soon as possible and find a place with much less crackling in the air. On a more subtle level, the hours we all spend in front of our beloved individual computer screens have similar destabilizing effects that call out for rebalancing.

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Page 2

I find that the vegetable garden (or flower garden) is a specific antidote to the electronic hum that increasingly permeates modern life. To use the metaphors of Asian healing arts, garden's Earth serves to ground and balance out the Air and Space of the computer. To translate that into plain English—the feeling of the fertile earth in your hands is like a soothing healing herb, a nutritious food for the mind, body, and soul.

Many years ago, I visited my parents' home while on a semester break from college. It was a time (perhaps you can recall such a period in your life) when I was feeling quite frazzled and stressed. My dad, bless him, sized up the situation immediately, took me outside, put a shovel in my hand, and showed me how to dig a small vegetable bed by the side of the house. We had never grown vegetables before, but somehow he knew (calling up memories from his own childhood) that putting my hands in the soil was exactly what I needed. He was right. I started to feel better immediately. It's the father-son memory I cherish most.

Perhaps you'll decide to start a vegetable garden because you want the kind of tasty tomatoes or cucumbers that you never can find in the store. Perhaps you'll do it out of your commitment to the environment. Perhaps to demonstrate to yourself a renewed desire to eat more nutritious foods. Maybe it'll be the exercise that motivates you. Or the fresh air and sunshine, or the craving for an activity where you can be fully present in the now. Maybe all of the above.

To create a society that can be sustainable for many generations, we'll need many more people in suburbs and cities to join those in rural areas in growing some of their own vegetables. This will provide a 21st century equivalent of the "victory gardens" of the World War II era. Perhaps this time around we'll call them "homeland security gardens." Or "sustainability gardens" or "save the planet gardens." Whatever name we choose, we'll need them for the future health of our nation and our world.

If you've got even a small sliver of ground where the sun shines several hours a day, give it a try. If not, you can start by growing a few vegetable or herb seedlings in pots on a deck or patio. Get some soil from a local garden shop, follow the directions that come with the seeds or seedlings, and remember to water. You don't have to over-think this. Like they say in those athletic shoe ads, "Just do it."

Daniel Redwood, DC, is the Editor-in-Chief of *Health Insights Today*.