

My favorite part of every year is when the first new green shoots start to poke up out of the soil and on the tips of branches. There's something magical in watching trees and plants that have appeared to be dead for the last several months coming back to life around you. Daffodils are a great indicator that the cold weather will soon be gone and summer is ahead. And once it warms up enough to garden, there is no feeling in the world like watching seeds that you planted begin to emerge and flourish.

On top of growing your own food and flowers, gardening has other physical benefits. It encourages being active and getting outside, something that seems to be getting rarer as the years go by. Being outside increases the amount of vitamin D that someone will receive. It has the potential to lower the amount of sodium in a person's diet because they are preparing fresh food that is more flavorful, reducing the need to heavily salt the food. Gardening can be a way to get your mind off of whatever is going on in life or the world as a whole. It connects people more to nature, instead of a computer or TV screen.

As it turns out, there are therapeutic benefits to gardening and horticulture as well as the physical benefits. Dr. C. F. Menninger, a botanist and psychiatrist who founded the Menninger Foundation, a facility where horticultural therapy is used, said "Through gardening, patients become more outward-going. Gardening encourages them to be more involved with something outside themselves, and it also gives purpose and direction to their lives." Patients that use garden therapy have a better way to release tension, learn patience, and learn to care for another living thing. It teaches that some things take time, and can provide an aspect of accountability when caring for plants.

Horticultural therapy is also used in prisons. The Chittenden Community Correctional Center in Burlington, Vermont reported fewer disciplinary problems during the months that the garden therapy program was active. The inmates can learn valuable life skills that can be used after release, grow food to be eaten in the prison, and give them something to be proud of, a feeling not often experienced in prisons. Unfortunately, the program was shut down due to a lack of funding for transportation and extra supervision. The Nebraska State Penitentiary has an external garden project where inmates grow and maintain the garden and harvest the vegetables in the fall. The Tecumseh State Correctional facility has had a garden since 2015. The inmates say that it gives them something to focus on other than their incarceration.

If you've always wanted a garden, but never been sure how, here is your push in the right direction. Whether it is in the ground or a single pot of plants on the patio, start gardening. Start small, and don't get discouraged if everything doesn't go right the first time. Sometimes you have to learn a lot of ways to accidentally kill plants before you can learn how to keep them alive. As long as you're learning from your mistakes, your garden will continue to get better and better.

For more information on gardening tips, contact Miranda Earnest at the Buffalo County Extension Office, 308-236-1235 or mearnest2@unl.edu.