

How does your garden grow? Are you more likely to be found outside with your hand trowel, or on the sofa watching HGTV? No judgment here, but did you know that growing your own, whether that's kale, tomatoes, nasturtium or sunflowers, comes with great health benefits?

In addition to fresh air and sunshine (vitamin D, anyone?), getting your hands dirty is a wonderful way to reduce stress and improve mood. Medical research supports that stress-reduction is key to overall improved health. It turns out stopping to smell (and plant) the roses is more than a missive on a greeting card.

Gardening can burn between 300-600 calories all without complicated choreography or listening to the grunts of the muscle bound masochist at the gym. Whether you're weeding, watering, mowing, or planting, you're building stronger bones and maintaining flexibility. Research also supports that being outside around green things makes people happier. Some of this comes from nature allowing us to slow our thoughts, and expend less mental effort. This results in improved focus when we need it.

You've heard about the value of probiotics in maintaining health. Our bodies contain over 100 trillion microbes, many of them healthy and important for our bodies. Research has shown that breathing in and digging around in certain soil bacteria can improve mood and support "good" bacteria levels. Many of these are essential to our well-being, preventing allergies, and even disease. British physician and microbiologist Graham Rook calls these beneficial microbes "Old Friends," and posits that their evolutionary survival helped establish our immune systems. Because our modern lives have distanced us, we must get in touch with them again by, literally, getting back to the garden.

So go ahead! Grow something and get your hands dirty. It turns out kids were on to something with their mud pies!