

ADAM FROST'S GARDENING FOR HEALTH

A happy head

It's becoming increasingly recognised that gardening can boost our mood when we're feeling down, but why?

Adam Frost explores the role gardening can play in improving our mental health

Being in his garden, in close contact with nature, has helped Adam recover from depression

PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

I have always known that being in the garden can help boost my mood and make me feel better, but I was never sure why. It goes back to my childhood when I spent a lot of time with my two sets of grandparents, who all loved gardening. Tidy Nan and Grandad had the classic 70s garden – bedding plants, a tidy lawn (with stripes of course), a path to one side and a washing line. There was also a greenhouse at the end, and it was my job to open it up in the morning, do the watering and check for any ripe tomatoes, which I loved. They also had an allotment where I spent many happy and safe hours.

If I wasn't with my tidy grandparents, I was down the road at Scruffy Nan and Grandad's, who had an over-grown wilderness outside their back door. There was a big pond and yucca plants dotted in the wilder planting. At the bottom of the garden there were two aluminium greenhouses – one was full of cacti and the other coleus – which is where I first learned to propagate. I used to set up a stall outside their house selling my plants to passers-by!

Wonderful times, but never once did I think this connection with gardening would provide me with a tool kit that I could dip into in later life when things got tough.

Growing awareness

Over the past few years, many of us have realised there is power in the space outside our back doors. It's spoken about a lot more in the media now, and I'm even working with the NHS to help create gardens for hospitals, which are incredibly important.



Easy tasks like raking leaves can feel calming and relieve stress

On a personal level, I have struggled with my mental health throughout my life and have found that working physically through things has always helped.

It wasn't until I met Mrs Frost, who over the years has had long bouts of depression, that the idea of gardening as a way to help started to become clear. When I met my wonderful wife, I'm not even sure she knew what a landscape gardener was – she looked like she had just come off the makeup counter at John Lewis and the only time she would go into the garden was to sunbathe! But as time went on and her mental health had its ups and downs, you could slowly see her engage with the garden. To start with I think it was because I was outside, but she slowly got more involved and gradually it has become a place where she can lose herself and find solace.

Fast forward to the past couple of years, and people have been asking why we've moved house and downsized. Well, lockdown was hard going for us, as it was for many people, and brought a lot into sharp focus. Sulina (Mrs Frost) was very poorly and one of my kids had health worries. Then at the back end of 2021 I caught Covid and was confined to a room, after which I ended up being told I had burn out and depression.

At that point I didn't want to be in the garden, which was strange – it just felt overwhelming. Everything that I would normally do felt wrong. I was being the classic 50-plus man and not really talking. I couldn't find peace anywhere, which I know may seem strange to some people looking in from the outside.



As I started to talk, I realised I had to change things, which we did as a family. We moved house and I slowly re-engaged with gardening again. On reflection I saw that the old, larger garden had become overwhelming as the members of my family became poorly. Moving has made me realise that as we get older, our relationships change – just like mine had with the garden.

Creating the new garden has reignited my passion for gardening. I'm at ease and don't see it as a place to crack through a list of jobs, but as somewhere to make me smile. I'll often take a photo of my favourite flower of the day, just to look at the detail.

So, if you're feeling overwhelmed, never be afraid to change things or the way you garden. Just make sure it works for you. Use your garden as a place to think or to escape and get stuck into a task. I've also found the garden is a great place to chat things through with Sulina and the rest of the family. Don't try too hard with your garden – enjoy the little things that catch your attention and don't worry too much about the big picture – a garden isn't about perfection, it's about you.

What to do now

So just how can your garden boost your mental health? Here are three things to try right now...

1 Get outside

Even a few minutes spent outdoors in a green space can make a difference to wellbeing by lowering stress levels and lifting your mood. Walk round your garden, watch the leaves blowing, listen to the birds or even just sit with a gardening book outside your back door.

2 Be fascinated

Set aside a time every day to check on your garden and let nature fascinate you. Tiny changes are as exciting as big ones. Whatever the season, there's always something to capture your attention. Being drawn in by nature helps to put life into perspective and enhance wellbeing.

3 Do those chores

Focusing on routine tasks offers the chance to empty your mind or mull things over – an escape from other concerns. So, caring for a garden by washing flowerpots or clearing leaves gives you space and time to think, as well as a sense of purpose and achievement.



Take a walk in your garden every day and notice the small changes

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Why gardening can lift our mood



Professor **Harriet Gross**, author of *The Psychology of Gardening*, shares why tending our plots – big or small – is good for a happy head

Give your mind a rest

Gardeners often say that their garden and contact with nature keep them sane, particularly in difficult times. Research shows that spending time outdoors gardening, at home or on an allotment, is one of the best ways to improve both mental and physical wellbeing. But why?

Gardening needs relatively little mental effort, compared to other kinds of highly demanding work, so it provides a chance for mental restoration. Many tasks in the garden, whether weeding, pruning or sweeping up leaves, act as a distraction while doing something purposeful.

People say they get fascinated by seeing plants grow, and the beauty of nature takes them into another world. This lets you switch off completely from your usual routines so your attention can wander. In that sense, gardening and the garden are a kind of sanctuary – an escape from daily stresses and concerns – helping us feel refreshed.

Express yourself

Another reason gardening makes us feel good is that it's creative, an opportunity to express our identity, which is psychologically rewarding in itself. Filling a space, however small, with plants that remind us of special places or people is an opportunity to reflect personal history and culture. Not only that, gardening is a truly optimistic activity, because it assumes a future when those plants, vegetables or trees will grow. That hope is realised when things do flourish, and contribute to a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement.

ADAM PHOTO: JASON INGRAM



Digging and other strenuous gardening jobs give us a boost of feel-good endorphins

Physical benefits

Gardening often involves considerable physical effort. Doing any exercise outdoors (green exercise) is known to improve people's mood more than doing it indoors. Exercise raises the heart rate, pumps blood to the brain and increases endorphins and serotonin levels, the brain chemicals that make us feel good.

Being outside in green space also lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Feeling more positive and less stressed makes it easier to think clearly and make decisions. So, physically tending the garden can help restore our wellbeing.

Easy starting points

Despite its potential for mental restoration, gardening sometimes seems daunting or difficult. If it does, then evidence shows that visiting gardens, a green view from a window or looking after an indoor plant can still have a positive impact. Alternatively, community gardens provide a shared space for gardening alongside others. Restoration is as much physical as psychological. Even five minutes in the garden or on the balcony to check on the bulbs can make a real difference to the day.



LISTEN to Adam's **Gardening for Health** podcast series for lots more tips and inspiration. Hear him talk to Harriet about how gardening can boost mental health, along with discussions on eating healthily, breathing clean air, healthy kids and more. Just scan the QR code or go to GardenersWorld.com/podcast



NEXT MONTH Adam explores how gardening can play a part in eating healthily