

Gardening for health

Jennifer Brizzi

I'M A BIG FAN OF THE ART OF GARDENING AND have been doing it about 20 years. But as much as I've enjoyed the beauty and good taste of the plants I've grown, I know the activity provides many more benefits the body, mind and spirit.

The most obvious one is the exercise. With our too-sedentary lives, any hobby that gets us outside and moving around is clearly a good one. Gardening keeps joints limber with frequent use, stretches muscles, burns calories. Turning soil with a hoe is a sustained workout that builds stamina, and pushing a heavy wheelbarrow around or moving that huge planter housing the fig tree builds strength throughout the body.

Countless studies have shown that gardening lowers stress levels, probably for a variety of reasons. Nature and its sounds, smells and sights have a relaxing effect on our psyches that cell phones and laptops don't. It's a noted ameliorator of mental ills from sour moods to deep depression. Some credit that to a benign bacterium in the dirt called *Mycobacterium vaccae* that helps up serotonin levels. Some studies of older gardeners show lower rates of dementia than their neighboring non-gardeners.

Because you can control what chemicals you put on your plants, and what plants you use, hybrid or heirloom, you can grow the best plants for nutrition and taste, not bred for shelf-stability, good looks or long life for traveling. That broccoli you just picked from the garden tonight and steamed will have much higher nutritional value—not to mention a tastier flavor—than that tired head in the supermarket picked several weeks ago. Not to mention that having a handy wealth of lovely produce motivates you to eat more of it, with its



beneficial nutrients and fiber.

And gardening is great for the health of the community at large, not only minimizing the carbon footprint of long-distance produce transport, but in the form of community gardens and school gardens, with their social benefits, a crucial factor in total health.

There are myriad ways to make this healthful activity even more so. Making healthy soil with good compost and mulches is one. Using untreated wood for any raised beds is key, as is having your soil checked for any harmful chemicals lurking there before you plant. Cornell Cooperative Extension can help with that (see our article on Master Gardener tips). Use natural pesticides in the garden — follow instructions carefully — and wash your bounty well before consumption.

Make sure your tetanus/diphtheria (Td) vaccination is up to date — adults need one every ten years — as it is present in soil and can enter breaks in the skin from pointy plants or sharp tools. Protect your skin from the sun with sunscreen and appropriate clothing — hats, long sleeves and pants. Protect yourself from disease-carrying ticks and mosquitoes with repellents. Protect your knees and back. Throwing my lower back out from too much soil tilling one spring a few years ago is not something I want to repeat.

Reduce strain on your body by working in ergonomically correct positions, such as bending over from slightly bent knees, not the waist, and make good use of your legs to help lift rather than having your back do all the work. Be kind to your back and hold heavy items close to the body. Protect it when pushing or pulling heavy things too. Don't twist and move slowly and careful, no jerky movements. Obviously, seek medical help immediately if you are

injured, feel dizzy or have arm or chest pain.

Those of us with disabilities — from arthritis to paraplegia — can still enjoy gardening with certain precautions. Occupational therapists can help. Garden tools with ergonomically curved handles can help with joint issues, as can extra padding. Cut down your workload with groundcovers, perennials and native plants, which require less maintenance. Design the garden to make simplify tasks. Katie Parry, a garden designer and landscaper at Grandiflora in Red Hook, helped create a user-friendly garden for a woman who used an electric wheelchair to get around.

"There had to be really good paving," Parry says. "And it's good to have a work table and even a sink at wheelchair height."

She says they made super sturdy raised beds so the gardener could pull herself out of the wheelchair and perch on the sides for her gardening chores. And that's not all.

"We made everything lightweight," Parry adds. "She had lightweight hoses with wands placed around the garden."

Irrigation systems and soaker hoses can help too, as does good mulching to reduce the water needs of those veggies, fruits and flowers.

Spacing is key. For anyone with physical limitations, those raised beds should be at least two feet tall, no more than two feet wide, and for wheelchair access, surrounded by three-foot-wide paved paths.

The physical activity of gardening gives everyone much needed exercise, especially crucial for those who may not get around as well. But whether disabled or not, each person's own health care provider can best tell them what kind of activities they can do and how much.

I started gardening with dozens of pots on a Brooklyn patio years ago, later progressing to raised beds in Rhinecliff. Now back to a few containers on a shady deck, I miss my big garden, but hope to be physically able to reap the many benefits of gardening in some form or another as long as I can hold a hoe. ●

For more health coverage from a local perspective, see our weekly health column in all Ulster Publishing's weekly newspapers and online at healthyhv.com

Open Days 2013 Schedule

Dutchess County

SATURDAY, MAY 11
Broccoli Hall – Maxine Paetro in Amenia (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

SATURDAY, JUNE 15
Beatrix Farrand garden at Bellefield in Hyde Park (12 noon to 4 p.m.)
Broccoli Hall – Maxine Paetro in Amenia (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SUNDAY, JUNE 30
Beatrix Farrand garden at Bellefield in Hyde Park (12 noon to 4 p.m.)
Zibby and Jim Tozer in Stanfordville (10 a.m. - 2 p.m.)
Roseview Dressage in Millbrook (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Belinda and Stephen Kaye in Millbrook (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Jade Hill – Paul Arcario and Don Walker in Amenia (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

Columbia County

SATURDAY, MAY 11
Margaret Roach in Copake Falls (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SATURDAY, JUNE 1
Margaret Roach in Copake Falls (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Arcadia – Wagner/Van Dam in West Taghkanic (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Kevin Lee Jacobs in Valatie (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Peter Bevacqua and Stephen King in Claverack (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SATURDAY, JUNE 15
Judson Bush Farm in Greenport (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Susan Anthony and Richard Galef in Craryville (10 a.m.-5 p.m.)
Hudson Hood in Hudson (11 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SUNDAY, JUNE 30

Helen Bodian in Millerton (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SUNDAY, JULY 28

Rockland Farm in Canaan (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
The Tilden Japanese Garden in New Lebanon (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

Ulster County

SATURDAY, JUNE 15
Lee Reich in New Paltz (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Teri Condon – Gardensmith Design in Highland (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

SATURDAY, JULY 13
Suzanne Pierot's Garden by the Stream in Willow (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
Gayle Burbank garden in Bearsville (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

to play off the idea that just as a blacksmith works iron to create a product, a "Gardensmith" is working the land to create a garden.

Her own garden in Highland will be opened to the public on Saturday, June 15 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. as part of the "Open Days" program sponsored by The Garden Conservancy, a national organization that works to preserve gardens and inspire the public about the design, care and sustainability of gardens. One of the ways they do this is through the annual Open Days program, partnering with people like Condon who have an exceptional private garden and bringing the public in for the day to appreciate it and, perhaps, become inspired.

Condon's garden is situated in an old apple orchard with a view of the Shawangunk Ridge. Serpentine stone paths take the visitor past metal artworks by Condon's husband, sculptor and Rock and Snowowner Richard Gottlieb, and to an Akebia-draped pergola, recessed patio and stone fire circle. Asked for the most striking feature of her garden, Condon says it's


probably the use of color and plant combinations. She likes to make offbeat choices and plant things in

an unusual way, like putting castor bean in pots; a plant that will grow 12 feet high in the ground, says Condon, but when contained becomes somewhat of a bonsai plant. "I like its foliage," she says. "I like to play with unexpected plant combinations." This is the fourth year she'll participate in the Open Days program. Usually the visitors to her garden number between 50-100, Condon says, and they come for different reasons. "Some are homeowners and some are designers. Some are people who are interested in horticulture. I really like it, because I get to meet great people and talk about gardens all day."

One of her visitors was noted garden writer Tovah Martin, who ended up writing an article about Condon that appeared in the spring 2013 issue of a *Better Homes & Gardens* special publication, *Deck, Patio and Outdoor Living*, available at Barnes & Noble on the Nook e-reader, Lowe's and Home Depot.

Condon says she's inspired by garden history, and remembers fondly a trip to England she took a few years back with her mother where they went on a garden tour. "I love that in England gardening is so important," she says. "Everybody knows all the history about every piece of property."

For more information about The Garden Conservancy and its Open Days program, visit www.gardenconservancy.org or call (845) 424-6500. ●



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