

New research on community gardening reveals the roots of emotional and physical health

June 21 2011

Did you ever make mud pies as a kid? Remember how good it felt to get your hands in the dirt, to run through the sprinkler, and get pollen from a sweet-smelling flower on your nose? Most kids who grow up in cities today never have this experience. But the latest research is about to change all that.

Jill Litt, PhD, author and associate professor at the University of Colorado School of Public Health and University of Colorado Boulder has been studying neighborhoods and health over the past decade. Litt 's research has shown that places such as [community gardens](#) matter in terms of neighborhood quality and people's health. "Community gardens may provide a way to enhance neighborhood environments while also promoting health and well being through economic, social and physical changes. Gardens yield fresh food, bring 'nature' to urban areas, bridge ethnically, economically and age [diverse communities](#), promote neighborhood beauty, build skills and knowledge of everyday life, strengthen community capacity and one's sense of community, and promote active and healthy lifestyles" said Litt.

Litt's research has shown that community gardens are affordable and accessible to people across the lifespan -- regardless of age, race, [socioeconomic status](#) or educational background. She found that community gardeners cultivate relationships with their neighbors, are more involved in civic activities, stay longer in their neighborhoods, eat

better and view their health more positively. In fact, 20 minutes of gardening a day translated to statistically higher ratings of [health](#). Moreover, people who garden found their neighborhoods to be safer, cleaner and more beautiful, regardless of educational and income status. These differences were rooted in the cultural, social and ecological connections created within the garden setting. The co-benefits of gardens stem from their ability to support healthy eating and active living. More than 50% of gardeners meet national guidelines for fruit and vegetable intake compared to 25% of non-gardeners. Gardeners report they get 12 hours a week of moderate to vigorous physical activity, which is about 30% more exercise than non-gardeners get.

Why do people garden? Because it makes you happy, healthy and whole. The research confirms what we intuitively know to be true; getting your hands dirty is fun and it turns out, good for you! Gardening provides an opportunity to get those hands dirty – beyond growing flowers, fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables, gardening provides a way to interact with nature, people and the environment; to socialize and get to know your neighbors; to build trust and develop pride in what you have grown; to share stories, successes and food with your friends, family and community. Gardening is good for the soul and good for your community.

More information: Findings from this research are published in the May issue of *Social Science and Medicine* and is currently ahead of print under the *American Journal of Public Health* First Look and will be in the August print issue.

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

Citation: New research on community gardening reveals the roots of emotional and physical

health (2011, June 21) retrieved 8 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-06-gardening-reveals-roots-emotional-physical.html>

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