

How gardening can improve the mental health of refugees

June 27 2018, by Mandy Hughes



Green spaces and meaningful tasks are both good for mental health. Author provided

After spending many years living in refugee camps, gardening can provide a safe space to establish identity, rebuild lives and attain happiness.

A [new study](#) on the Myanmar former refugee community in the regional

city of Coffs Harbour revealed the importance of [gardening](#), and in particular how this connection has a positive impact on the mental health of people who have faced severe trauma and are now settling in an unfamiliar place.

What did the study find?

People from refugee backgrounds face many complex challenges when they arrive in a new country. Engagement with food can present both a challenge, in terms of unfamiliar foods and foreign ways of cooking, as well as a way to be happy when [traditional foods](#) can be found and shared.

Previous studies have shown how migrants often adopt poor food habits when settling in a new country. A key finding of this new study is that traditional, often healthier foods are preferred. One way to access these foods is through gardening.

The sub-tropical climate and fertile soil in Coffs Harbour make it an ideal place to grow foods like those from Myanmar.

All participants in this study had home gardens where they grew traditional foods such as "very hot" chillies, rosella (a type of hibiscus grown for their leaves), a big variety of Asian eggplants, as well as other "jungle" foods. Growing these rare (in Australia) plants was possible through the well-developed Myanmar community network that shared seeds, seedlings and crops.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Having a garden provided preferred foods but also contributed to good mental health and wellbeing by creating a place where people who had faced considerable trauma could feel safe and happy.

How is gardening good for mental health?

[Research](#) has found spending time in nature can significantly improve mental health. [Gardening](#) offers a way to be in nature that is both productive and relaxing. [Like all forms of exercise](#), it is also a source of "happy hormones" (serotonin and dopamine).

Gardening [has been shown to provide](#) clear mental health benefits for people from refugee backgrounds. Everyday activities such as gardening

offer meaningful experiences and a way to reconnect with positive memories of home that can help to make a refugee's new country [feel more like home](#).



Making unfamiliar surroundings seem like home is important for people who have experienced ongoing uncertainty. Author provided

Participants spoke of how gardening made them happy because it helped them re-imagine their homeland, families and culture.

Feeling at home in unfamiliar surroundings is important for people who

have experienced ongoing uncertainty. One man spoke about how his garden in a rental property was not only a source of food but also a way to recreate a familiar place: "the plants, fruit and vegetables we grow in our garden, it's like we're eating food in Burma."

Participants in this study spoke of how gardens provided an income and a way to be independent, but also offered a means to feel happy and purposeful. One man said: "if I hadn't been doing gardening it would be so bad. So I love my gardening. It helped a lot with my mental health and well-being. "

Another man, after suffering a stroke and spending several months in hospital, longed to be back in his garden. He described how gardening was an essential part of his recovery: "it is therapy, yes. Also, for my left side I do exercise. I weeding slowly, good exercise [...] when I come home from the hospital I go into my garden and I look around my garden, my feeling is good."



Myanmar community leader exploring a local garden. Author provided

The foods we choose to eat have [health](#) impacts, but the physical act of growing our own [food](#) also has positive effects on our [mental health](#).

Gardening is a way for people who have faced considerable trauma to feel safe and with nature, as well as re-establish their identity and reconnect with their culture. As summed up by one participant: "gardening is going to give happiness for a lifetime."

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