

Survey: People turned to gardening for stress relief, food access during pandemic

March 17 2022, by Emily C. Dooley



UC Davis lead gardener, Julia Schreiber, picks sunflowers in garden. Credit: UC Davis

People who turned to gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic did so to relieve stress, connect with others and grow their own food in hopes

of avoiding the virus, according to a survey conducted by researchers at the University of California, Davis, UC Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR) and international partners.

The survey report, "Gardening during COVID-19: Experiences from gardeners around the world," highlights the positive role [gardening](#) plays in mental and physical health, said Alessandro Ossola, an assistant professor of plant sciences.

"Connection to nature, relaxation and [stress relief](#) were by far the biggest reasons gardeners cited," Ossola said.

The researchers sent links to online surveys via targeted emails to gardening groups, in newsletters and on social media between June and August 2020. They were hoping to gauge the significance of gardening as a way to cope with risk, how the pandemic changed gardening and what barriers existed.

More than 3,700 surveys were returned by gardeners from Australia, Germany and the United States.

Isolation, depression, anxiety reported

More than half of those responding said they felt isolated, anxious and depressed during the early days of the pandemic, and 81% had concerns about [food access](#). During this time, people also had more time to garden, and they saw the activity as a safe haven and a way to connect socially with others.



Cabbage and spinach grow in the student garden outside of the Segundo residence hall. Credit: Emily C. Dooley, UC Davis

"Not only did gardeners describe a sense of control and security that came from food production, but they also expressed heightened experiences of joy, beauty and freedom in garden spaces," said the report, which broke up responses by region or states.

In California, for instance, 33% of gardeners said their [plots](#) generated about 25% of their produce needs. Some gardeners with access to large spots to garden also grew food for their community.

Gardening during the pandemic offered a way to socialize safely.

"People found new connections in the garden," said Lucy Diekmann, an urban agriculture and [food](#) systems advisor with UCANR who helped write the report. "It became a shared hobby as opposed to an individual one."

Responses were fairly similar across all locations, even though the surveys hit in the summer and winter depending on location. "We see remarkable similarities in terms of what people are saying and the way they are interacting with their gardens," she said.



Julia Schreiber, UC Davis Student Farm lead gardener, in 2021. Credit: UC Davis

More green opportunities needed

Many respondents also found it hard to find and buy seeds or plants and locate a spot to grow.

The report findings suggest an opportunity for government, community groups, businesses and others to promote community health by providing green spaces.

Gardening should be thought of as a public health need, one that could serve communities well in future pandemics or disasters. New Zealand, Canada and some countries in Europe write green prescriptions for people to garden to improve health.

"We need to change the narrative of how urban gardening is framed and elevate it to a key strategy for both environmental and public health," Ossola said.

UC Davis graduate student Summer Cortez assisted with the research, as did Monika Egerer at the Technical University of Munich in Germany and experts from these Australian-based entities: Brenda Lin at Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organization, Jonathan Kingsley at Swinburne University of Technology and Pauline Marsh at University of Tasmania.

More information: Summer Cortez et al, Gardening During COVID-19: Experiences from gardeners around the world (2022). [DOI: 10.3733/ucanr.6720](https://doi.org/10.3733/ucanr.6720)

Provided by UC Davis

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