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# The Benefits of Gardening

## Contact with Nature: the Surprising Health Benefits of Gardening

We all enjoy spending time in nature and whether we consider ourselves tree-hugging hippies or not, as human-beings we know intrinsically that nature is good for us and regularly seek out parks, bodies of water and gardens.

To receive the benefits from contact with nature it need not be remote and unspoiled; nearby, everyday encounters with nature such as patting your dog, walking barefoot on the grass and watering your houseplants can also yield significant benefits for health and wellbeing.

Psychologists have long known that nature plays an important role in human health and nature-based interventions have been a component of medicine and public health since the days of Cleopatra.

Contact with nature has been shown to improve cognitive function- that is our ability to think clearly. This is not new to gardeners. We know that solutions to a myriad of life's problems can be discovered while pottering in the garden. The good news is the benefits from contact with nature can be reaped from indoor nature contact too. A study was done in 2008 that took a large group of students from the University of Michigan and asked them to complete a series of complex math problems. To complete

the test students were randomly allocated to a desk in a featureless room with a leafy green pot plant or a desk in a featureless room without a pot plant. The students who completed the math problems in the company of a pot plant were significantly more likely to have correctly answered the math problems. If you want to think clearly in the office, it looks like a pot plant might help.

It appears too that exercising in nature has additional health benefits when compared to exercising indoors. Research from the University of Essex, in 2012 found that people who exercised in pleasant outdoor environments had greater positive effects on blood pressure, self-esteem and mood than people who engaged in the same physical activity, conducted at the same intensity, indoors. Meaning a brisk walk around the block may have added health benefits compared to a brisk walk on the treadmill.

2015 is the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's International Year of the Soil. As gardeners we know healthy soils are imperative for healthy lives. It is not just the lives of human beings that are affected but the lives of others on the planet too, plants, animals and the very small lives of microbes. Emerging research from biochemists at Stanford University is looking at the microbes in our digestive system and on the surfaces of our skin. These



Victoria Egl: in touch with nature

researchers are beginning to show that through contact with nature and contact with soil microbes, the microbes living in our body may be boosted, which in turn influences our immunity- improving our bodies' ability to fight infection. It seems like science is finally proving what mothers all over the world have known for generations... it's OK if kids eat a bit of dirt now and then.

Much of the information on the benefits of contact with nature is well known in the gardening community. Our community gardens, backyards, pot plants and upcycled plastic bottle greenhouses on window ledges are all everyday examples of landscapes that connect us to nature. Contact with nature has a wide range of health benefits from helping us think clearly, to boosting our self-esteem and improving our immunity. If you are reading this and haven't been outside or touched nature in a while I encourage you to do so now. Potter in the garden, pull some weeds, harvest some vegies, or, if you are so inclined...hug your favourite tree. Go on... it's good for you!

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Tobias, Victoria's husband, in the Schrebergarten in Lotzwil

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