

GARDENING: A SOCIAL PRESCRIPTION FOR YOU AND YOUR CLIENTS

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

In the spirit of the social prescribing movement, gardening may be one of the most effective ways to feel better — at least, anecdotally.

Last December, the *National Post* ran an article by Joseph Brean with a title that kind of says it all: “In medicine, social prescribing is catching on despite a lack of evidence.” Brean says social prescribing is considered by some to be a “gimmick” that’s gone mainstream, especially in Britain, where it’s been adopted as a key government policy.

Brean points out that the lack of strong evidence is at least partly due to the fact that most studies of social prescribing have been “small, anecdotal, qualitative, and poorly designed.” Nevertheless, social prescribing is “logical and intuitively attractive, especially for elderly people and the so-called worried well,” he says.

However, as the social prescribing movement continues to grow, more studies are sure to follow. In the mean time, does it matter if there is a lack of evidence, as long as it helps people feel better and doesn’t hurt anyone?

Taking gardening as an example, some studies do support its therapeutic benefits. In “Why gardening therapy is being prescribed by doctors,” Karen Gordon references studies that suggest being near vegetation improves physical and mental health and lowers depression. Other studies suggest gardening boosts brain health, reduces pain, improves memory and concentration, and benefits people with dementia. One study even suggests soil may contain microbes that act like antidepressants.

That aside, gardening is a practically perfect opportunity for mindfulness practice, which has been proven effective.

“...research shows [mindfulness] can have a huge impact on your stress levels, helping to stave off anxiety, slash depression risk, boost productivity, and ease insomnia,” says Gordon.

But whether there is hard supporting evidence or not, even simple gardening projects are creative, present-moment activities that get people outside in the fresh air, connecting with nature, getting some exercise, and doing something that brings tangible, beautiful rewards.

And surely that can help some people feel a little bit better.



No garden? No problem.

Opportunities to garden abound for everyone from absolute beginners to avid green thumbs.

Large public gardens, community parks, and heritage properties often seek volunteers to assist with regular maintenance as well as special projects.

Other places to check out include the Victoria Horticultural Society, City of Vancouver (search “Green Vancouver”), Fresh Roots, LifeCycles Fruit Tree Project, and Earthwise Society Garden Buddies. There are many more!

Community gardens are another increasingly popular option across the province.

- **The City of Vancouver** has more than 110 community gardens operated by community groups and listed on a helpful map. vancouver.ca/people-programs/community-gardens.aspx

- **In the City of Victoria**, choose from three different types of community gardens: commons gardens, allotment gardens, and community orchards. A map is available online, as well as information on how to start your own community garden. www.victoria.ca/EN/main/residents/parks/community-gardens.html

- **In the B.C. interior**, community gardens are fenced, shared land divided into garden plots for use by anyone in the community. www.interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca/programs/food-security/community-gardens

SOURCES

Brean, J. (December 21, 2018). In medicine, social prescribing is catching on despite a lack of evidence. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/news/in-medicine-social-prescribing-is-catching-on-despite-lack-of-evidence>

Gordon, K. (April 10, 2017). Why gardening therapy is being prescribed by doctors. *Net Doctor*. <https://www.netdoctor.co.uk/healthy-living/wellbeing/a26431/gardening-as-a-therapy-for-health/>