

Gardening has a positive effect on mental health...

With the prospect of warmer weather ahead, many of us will be digging out the shears, dusting off the lawnmower and getting our gardens back up to scratch for the summer.

The popularity of gardening is on the increase in the UK, especially among the young, with 20-to-34-year-olds now spending double the national average on their outdoor spaces.

Wales has got the gardening bug too. Prospective gardeners in Cardiff hoping for one of the city's 2,000 allotment plots face waiting lists of up to five years.

Fans of the hobby often cite the physical benefits, but there's also strong evidence that it's good for our minds.

Mental health charity Mind, former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and celebrity Kim Wilde are among those who have championed gardening as an elixir for mental wellbeing, and research seems to back their claims.

Between 2009 and 2013, mental health charity Mind delivered a programme called EcoMinds that helped people with mental health problems get involved in "Ecotherapy" - a blend of gardening and conservation work.

More than 12,000 people took part, with seven out of 10 reporting major increases in their mental wellbeing.

Similarly, researchers from the UK, Canada and Sweden have all found that gardening and spending time in

Gardening can help both your physical and mental health. Here, Mark Smith speaks to one 30-year-old who claims utilising her outdoor space has helped regain her sense of worth

green spaces have a positive effect on mental health. But does it really work?

Jayne Lutwyche, 30, from Cardiff, believes it does. She's a Research Champion for the National Centre for Mental Health, a research organisation studying the causes of mental ill health.

She has lived with mental health problems for many years, and finds gardening to be a useful tool in staying well.

"I've battled with mental health problems all my adult life," explains Jayne, who works as a journalist and website editor.

"I've suffered with both bulimia and bipolar disorder - one is a gnawing, negative voice coupled with an unhealthy relationship with food; the other is like a supernova of emotions, from high to low to just plain paranoid."

Like many people with experience of mental health problems, Jayne has had to try a range of different treatments before finding something that works for her, and gardening has played its part.

"Finding the right medication has been key for me in finding an even keel and avoiding the most severe highs and lows, but when it comes to dealing with the slightly less drastic moods, I've always found gardening

very therapeutic.

"Whether I'm working in the garden with my family and friends or weeding while listening to an audio book, it's a fantastic peacemaker for my mental health. It gives me something to do, and allows me to do things at my own pace - taking on bigger or smaller tasks depending on what I feel able to tackle that day.

"One of the problems with bipolar disorder is retaining focus; if you're feeling manic or anxious it's hard to stick to simple tasks, but one of the nice things about gardening is the flexibility - you can easily jump between different jobs or focus on one thing.

"It also helps with regaining order during depressive periods, when something as simple as getting out of bed can be a real challenge. You may not feel like watering the flowers, but if you don't they'll wilt and die, so you just have to get up and get on with it."

Jayne believes gardening is particularly effective because it exercises both body and mind.

"The combination of physical and mental stimulation really helps me to feel calm and relaxed, and it's great to be outside breathing in fresh air and watching the wildlife mill about," she added.

"It also gives me a tremendous

sense of achievement to create something from almost nothing, which is so helpful if I'm feeling low."

National Centre for Mental Health director and psychiatrist Professor Ian Jones agrees that gardening has a positive effect because of a combination of factors.

"Gardening is so beneficial because it ticks lots of wellbeing boxes. For starters it gets people outdoors and exercising, which lots of studies have shown to be helpful for maintaining mental health, and crucially, gardening is a very inclusive form of exercise.

"Because it can be as intense or as gentle as you like, almost anyone can get involved in some way, even those not physically capable of more intense forms of exercise like running or lifting weights.

"Secondly, with community or group gardening projects, there's also the additional benefit of building up social links and a sense of community, which can help combat loneliness and feelings of isolation that many people with mental health suffer from.

"Finally, gardening offers lots of potential to learn new skills and help people regain a sense of worth, which mental health problems can take a real toll on."

While Professor Jones is an advo-

cate of gardening as an aid to mental health, he acknowledges that it isn't a miracle cure.

"Gardening has many benefits, but it's by no means a magic bullet; everyone is different, and for many people it isn't going to replace medication or talking therapies, although it can certainly supplement them.

"I think more research will need to be done before we start to see it being prescribed widely by GPs for example.

"But there is definitely potential for gardening and similar outdoor activities to become useful tools in improving people's mental health."

And the benefits of gardening aren't just for those with mental health problems - Jayne believes we can all get something out of the hobby.

She added: "It promotes a feeling of wellness in yourself, and it's an opportunity to help the natural world. Not only do you get all the health benefits, it's also real pleasure to be able to relax in a beautiful space you've created that reflects your personality."

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► Nuffield Health consultant spinal surgeon Michael McCarthy - a keen gardener

How to avoid pack pain with weeding and wheelbarrow work

BACK pain is so common that almost every person will suffer from it during their lifetime, writes Michael J H McCarthy, consultant spinal surgeon at Nuffield Health Cardiff and Vale Hospitals.

In the majority of cases, it is uncommon to identify a single cause for the back pain, but fortunately most resolves spontaneously without the need for medical intervention.

When summer comes, it is tempting to do the gardening in a fit of activity, often squeezing a week's worth into a weekend.

Repetitive actions such as digging, weeding and wheelbarrow work can lead to back trouble, unless you know how to perform these safely and efficiently.

Having the right tools for the job in the right size will help, too.

For people with existing knee, hip or back pain, extra care must be taken to avoid muscle strain in these areas.

When your garden wheelbarrow is ready to be emptied, think and

bend from the hips and knees before you lift it to dump out the load - don't use your back for this.

Bending from the hips and knees gives the advantage of using very strong muscles to lift the load and avoids straining the back.

To empty the wheelbarrow, straighten your body slowly. Lean your weight forward on to your front leg and keep a long line from your head, through your spine down to your tailbone.

A long straight spine will help protect your back muscles from straining. Remember not to overload the wheelbarrow.

Weeding is best performed using long handled tools or by kneeling. When working on your hands and knees, keep your spine long and beware of any muscle tension, especially in the shoulders.

Relax this out if any starts to develop.

Using kneepads or a kneeling stool can help. Having raised beds and narrow borders can prevent bending and over-reaching.



► Jayne Lutwyche has suffered with both bulimia and bipolar disorder and finds gardening to be a useful tool in staying well

PROTECT YOUR BACK

Top tips from Michael J H McCarthy, consultant spinal surgeon at Nuffield Health on avoiding back pain in the garden

- Avoid excessive bending, lifting, twisting, leaning and pulling
- Steer any turning, leaning or twisting movements of your spine from your pelvis
- Use adequately sized tools, such as lawn edgers that are the correct height for you
- Use the no-dig technique of mulching with humus rich material and allow the worms to do the job of breaking down clay soils
- Dig up the long tap roots of weeds with a spade, before trying to pull them out
- Use mulches such as bark chippings and intelligent planting systems with perennials and ground cover to reduce weeds
- Avoid carrying heavy watering cans; use a hose or two part-filled watering cans carried in each arm
- Wear a tool belt to avoid constantly bending to pick them up
- Use a wheelbarrow to move compost around
- Small buckets half filled with compost / fertiliser will make for lighter transport
- Use a lawnmower with powered wheels
- Use a table or potting shed for potting plants to avoid bending
- Avoid staying in the same position for long periods
- Don't forget to take regular breaks and sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labours.
- Don't overdo it and remember that it is often normal to feel stiff or have mild muscular aches the day after any unaccustomed exercise, and this does not necessarily mean you have done yourself any harm or significantly injured your back.

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Help us change lives

The National Centre for Mental Health is working to find out more about what causes mental health problems, and how to make life better for people affected by them.

If you or a loved one have ever been diagnosed with a mental health problem, you can help. Contact us today to find out how you can make a difference.

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029 2068 8401

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