



Gardening is Good for You

New research says the physical and emotional benefits of gardening are worthwhile, especially for older people.

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You might love gardening because of the connection it offers with nature, the nutritious vegetables it produces for your family or the way coming home to a beautifully landscaped acreage makes you feel.

Now, researchers at Kansas State University are saying the act of gardening offers health benefits, too: It can offer enough moderate physical activity to keep older adults in shape, keep older hands strong and nimble, and improve self-esteem.

"One of the things we found is that older adults who are gardeners have better hand strength and pinch force, which is a big concern as you age," said Candice Shoemaker, KSU professor of horticulture.

Shoemaker is part of a KSU research team studying the ways in which gardening affects the health of older adults.

She works with Mark Haub, associate professor of human nutrition, and Sin-Ae Park, a research associate in horticulture who earned her doctorate in horticulture from K-State in December 2007.

The American Society for Horticultural Science publication, HortScience, published information in February based on a study that assessed 15 areas of health in older adults, from both those who garden and those who don't. The researchers looked at measurements like bone mineral density, sleep quality, physical fitness, hand strength and psychological well-being.

"We found that with gardening tasks older adults can, among other things, improve their hand strength and self-esteem at the same time," Park said.

Although Shoemaker said that differences between gardeners and non-gardeners showed up in a few health assessments like hand strength, overall physical health and self esteem, results from some of the other areas were more ambiguous.

"If we had a larger sample, I think we would see more health differences between those who garden and those who don't, including in areas like sleep quality and life satisfaction," she said.

The results about the positive impact of gardening on hand strength prompted Park and the researchers to explore this area further. They are now analyzing data from an eight-week horticulture therapy program that targeted hand strength in stroke patients.

"They did tasks like mixing soil and filling pots," Park said. "They had to use their hands all of the time, so that was good exercise—and they really enjoyed it."

Shoemaker, who also researches gardening as a prevention strategy to childhood obesity, said that studying the physical benefits of gardening is important for older adults because gardening is a physically active hobby that provides an alternative to sports or other exercise.

"There's a lot of natural motivation in gardening," Shoemaker said. "For one thing, you know there's a plant you've got to go out and water and weed to keep alive. If we get the message out there that older adults can get health benefits from gardening, they'll realize that they don't have to walk around the mall to get exercise."