



Why You Need to Garden This Year

This is not the article I thought I'd be writing this month. The merry month of May, when I expected to be rhapsodizing about newly leafed-out trees and industrious birds feeding their chicks. Instead, as I write this, a third of the way through the cruelest April, all of us are coping with grief, fear, worry, and a sense of helplessness we just can't seem to shake. And we feel as if we're doing it alone. How to lighten this burden?

You need to make a garden. It will soothe your stress and lift your spirits, move your muscles and renew your resolve. Did you know that gardening is actually prescribed as treatment for anxiety and depression? Did you know that every prison in Connecticut has a gardening program for inmates—and while the recidivism rate for the general population of released prisoners is about 40%, the rate for those who participated in prison gardening programs nationwide is about 10%. In Connecticut, at least through 2015 (the last year for which my lazy Google search could find data), the rate was zero.

Zero.

Think about it. Right now it's very common to say we feel "imprisoned" at home, but those inmates live the real thing, with loneliness, boredom, loss of freedom, and despair. Yet they find a way past all of it. They find serenity, self-esteem, and purpose, through the simple process of digging in the dirt. Planting seeds and caring for them, from frail seedlings to proud harvest, teaches them to look to the future with hope.

It will do the same for you. There is no sci-fi fantasy to equal the real-life magic of planting those nondescript little seeds in soil and then watching a few days later as the first tiny leaves push themselves out of the ground and into the light. I've done it more years than I care to admit, and still, I never can quite believe it's really going to happen.

And no matter how much you're fretting—and we are all fretting at an Olympic level right now—there's just something about going outside and doing repetitive tasks that clears your head. You'll start in on what looks like an interminable row of digging, slip into a happy meditation on what the row will look like come summer, and suddenly realize you're almost done. And even if you're working alone, you won't be lonely, because you can't help but feel connected to all the people who worked the land

before you, generation upon generation for thousands of years. With your shovel and fork, you've taken your place in the great cycle of the seasons, and are welcomed and comforted.

Be warned, though: The magic only happens if you work with hand tools. Bring in noisy gas-powered tillers and weed whackers, and your contemplative hour instantly morphs into just another set of chores.

What to grow? Of course, some vegetables, if you're physically able and have a sunny spot. If you're one of the lucky ones, plant for the food banks, which are already seeing unprecedented demand. If you're one of the less lucky, plant to feed yourself and your family. If you've never gardened before, two excellent resources are the Fruition website, www.fruitionseeds.com (mentioned last month) and www.Joegardener.com, whose podcasts are very instructive. If you're not inclined to do any research, the basics will take you a good part of the way: a sunny spot with good drainage; enriched soil (compost please, not chemicals) and regular, deep watering; and daily inspection to head off pest or disease problems and ensure prompt harvesting (no baseball-bat-sized zucchini for you!). Plant in your back yard, in elegant imported pots or discarded buckets, in fancy raised beds or just in the ground. Whatever you plant will reward you tenfold. Don't forget to mix in some flowers with the vegetables. They're practical as well as pretty, attracting pollinators and other beneficial insects. Marigolds, zinnias, cosmos, borage, nasturtium--all are easy and inexpensive.

Yes, it's May. The trees are newly leafed out, and industrious birds are feeding their chicks. The planet is turning toward the sun, and so do we. Stay safe, everybody.