

Nurture yourself with the restorative powers of gardening

Gardening isn't just a hobby. As plant parents will tell you, it is a committed relationship that will nourish you

Jayanthi Madhukar
feedback@livemint.com

In O Henry's short story, *The Last Leaf*, a young artist in Greenwich who is seriously ill with pneumonia, is convinced that she will die when the last leaf from the ivy vine outside her bedroom window is shed. Surprisingly, it doesn't fall. The leaf, which she doesn't realise is painted, heals her. Considering the number of people who took up gardening during the pandemic, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that many of us have been healed by the activity. Is it any surprise then, that there's a growing tribe of plant parents who find inspiration and calm amidst their potted plants?

Z*, who has been grieving the loss of her husband, initially spent time in her terrace garden because it was her spouse's pride. "I simply couldn't let it go," she says. Today, she feels it is her solace. "It is con-

tinually teaching me about letting go and focusing on the present. The time spent in gardening can be exhausting yet energizing. It is my catharsis," she says.

Most of us think of gardening as a hobby but in truth, it is a relationship. Preparing the soil, sowing the seeds, watering them, and then watching the seedlings grow into plants is a commitment.

"I have learned to enjoy the journey, even when I don't see results immediately," Vandana Bellur says. She introduces herself as an amateur hibiscus breeder and runs an Instagram account, Varuna Garden, where she shares details of her gardening successes and failures. "I have learned that hard work pays off and that it is important to persevere even when things are difficult. Certain things are beyond my control and there is nothing I can do but deal with it slowly," says Bellur.

Like any healthy relationship, gardening gives back all the love and nurturing you shower on it. Author Dr Sue Stuart-Smith wrote in her 2020 book, *The Well-Gardened Mind: The Restorative Power of Nature*, "A garden gives you a protected physical space which helps increase your sense of mental space and it gives you quiet, so you can hear your own thoughts. The more you immerse yourself in working with your hands, the freer you are



Amateur hibiscus breeder Vandana Bellur with her potted plants

internally to sort feelings out and work them through.

CENTRING YOUR ATTENTION

These sentiments ring true with avid gardener Dr Mythri Shankar, a Bengaluru-based nuclear medicine specialist and

author of *Ease: How to Lose Weight, Heal, Prevent and Reverse Diabetes*. "I did a lot of research on the healing effects of gardening for the book and found it to be an attention-centring technique as well as a stress management strategy," she says.

She talks of the positive anticipation

that her garden of ornamental plants, vegetables and fruits elicits in her. Every morning, she takes a 10-minute walk around her garden, which she likens to her ward rounds at the hospital. "There is always a pleasant surprise waiting for me in the form of a flower, fruit, vegetable or herbs. Sometimes, it can be a frog and one time, it was an abandoned kitten." She laughs at the recollection.

Just as much as gardening is empowering, it brings in a sense of surrender. Bellur notes, "I think all gardeners can relate to this especially when you're dealing with a pest problem."

Above all, gardening teaches life lessons on acceptance. "Every time a plant dies, I have learnt to make peace with it and come to terms with my loss slowly," Z says. In addition to the physical act of nurturing the plants, Bellur says gardening has nurtured her soul. "It has helped me grow spiritually. Spending time in my garden and watching the plants grow has given me a great sense of contentment in life."

There are other benefits of gardening. David Rojas, a researcher at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health and Colorado State University and the lead author of a study published in *The Lancet Planet Health*, found that for every 10% increase in vegetation within 1,600 feet of your

home, your probability of death drops by 4%. The healing effects of gardening have been proven in patients with PTSD and in patients recovering from operations.

Gardening teaches you a lot about self-care. "Just as you nourish the soil, you should nourish your body," Dr Shankar says further noting, "Just as the plants drop their leaves, you should learn to let go what isn't in your control. Just as a plant grows stronger after pruning, you should be able to spring back to life after any adversity."

Gardening has an intrinsic future-orientation as well. When Bellur creates a new hibiscus variety, she begins with cross pollinating two hibiscus flowers and then harvests and sows the seeds. It takes time and any of the steps could fail. Till the new plant flowers, she has no idea what to expect: Will it have multiple whorls? What will its colour be? Will the flowers have anthers and stigma? "This sense of anticipation helps me to stay motivated and focussed. It also instills a greater aspiration to do our bit for the future generation. The rate at which the present generation is using up resources, this is the least we can do," Bellur concludes.

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