



## How gardening can help improve wellbeing

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By Dr Shahnaz Camatchee on the 18 November 2021

Dr Shahnaz Camatchee explains her love of gardening, how it can help improve physical and mental wellbeing and also play a role in tackling climate change.



Dr Shahnaz Camatchee

We are living through very challenging times, especially with the ongoing pandemic and constant, unfair bashing of GPs by the government and the media. There are GPs out there totally burnt out, leaving the profession and many more contemplating whether to leave as I write this article.

I have been working in the NHS for 20 years, with nearly 15 years as a locum GP due to family commitment and health reasons. In the early part of my NHS training, due to merciless bullying, I was ready to give up medicine for good. And I would have done, if it wasn't for the solid rock support of my husband and gardening.

We all know that general practice has been severely underfunded by the government over the last 10 years or more. GPs now often have to choose between their careers and their physical and mental wellbeing. So what are the outlets for GPs? Apart from medication, there has to be other things that could help.

### My love of gardening

I have always been an advocate of and passionate about nature, plants and gardening and this has been my lifeline over the last 20 years working in the NHS. I would have taken up horticulture if I ever left my profession.

My passion for gardening stemmed from my childhood years in tropical Asia where I spent the first six years of my life. I have precious memories of visiting my Nan's huge garden filled with tropical plants, flowers and organic produce.

I spent the next 10 years of my childhood growing up in the Middle East and helping my mother in our little balcony garden. After which I embarked to Eastern Europe to study medicine for eight years - I remember taking my potted Jasmine all the way from Dubai to Prague to keep me company until making my way to the UK more than 20 years ago.

I am proud to say I am a 'bonafide plantaholic'. Sure, I have killed many plants to get to where I am and have grieved momentarily over them, but nevertheless, the passion for gardening is as solid as before and has become perhaps more so during the pandemic. Gardening has helped me to cope with the work stress, anxiety, loss of family members and colleagues to Covid-19 and the ever increasing demoralising and demeaning attacks on GPs.

### How can gardening help?

I have been encouraging a lot of patients to take up some form of gardening now - more than before the pandemic. Mental health illnesses are on the rise among patients and healthcare workers, no one is ever immune from it.

It has been found that gardening can:

- help reduce the risk of stroke and heart attack
- help burn calories
- reduce stress
- help improve the immune system
- provide a purpose and sense of worth
- help to connect people with nature and the world
- provide free anger therapy
- be a great way to enhance your sensory system
- allow people to grow produce for better healthy eating and living
- decrease osteoporosis
- reduce the risk of dementia.

I also believe gardening can help one enter a magical and spiritual place where you forget about your stress, bills and work.

So, in a nutshell, gardening has enormous benefits for both mental and physical wellbeing.

You don't need to have a garden to grow plants and flowers. A small plant on a window sill is equally good in reaping so many benefits.

I recently had my appraisal and even my appraiser was surprised at the amount of plants I grow indoors. I gave my appraiser a Zoom tour of the plants. I have about 150 indoor plants and loads in the garden. I have encouraged my appraiser to take up gardening and I believe her next year's personal development plan includes an aim to grow more plants, which I am looking forward to in our next meeting in 12 months' time.

### Gardening and our climate

I am now looking forward to growing more organic produce, planting more plants and trees and encouraging more wildlife in the garden. I am also looking forward to the community school garden projects in my children's school.

Gardening can also help combat climate change. The polluted air we are all breathing in is resulting in increasing asthma cases and plants can help to improve the quality of air we breathe in.

The recent Earth Shot Prize initiative from the Royal Foundation highlighted innovative ideas from around the world to improve our climate, air quality and oceans.

You may ask, why I am writing about gardening. The simple answer to that is; we all need to find ways to connect with nature, and do what we can to improve our mental, physical health and wellbeing.

My dream is that hopefully, in the near future and with a bit of funding, every GP premises will be able to invest in small gardening spaces with a garden club for patients, NHS staff. Who knows, perhaps secondary care will follow in their footsteps?

My Earth Shot goal is to try and encourage more people to take up gardening. Hence I leave with you with this quote from Martin Luther King Jr. 'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.'

- Dr Shahnaz Camatchee is a GP in North London