How many of you have been outside, weeding, turning over the soil, cleaning the garden, planting, dreaming? You can all put your hands down! This time of year is a magical time. The possibilities in our gardens are limitless. Why do you garden? Daydream right now about why you spend so many hours outdoors groveling in the earth, reveling in an herb garden, proudly flaunting our dirty fingernails.

Your reason for gardening is...

Scientists have found that being in a natural environment lowers blood pressure, reduces muscle tension, and increases alpha waves in the brain. Just looking at pictures of nature can reduce stress and lessen negative emotions.

When asked why they garden, gardeners reply that they find it an escape from the stresses of work, family pressure, and the pace of daily life. Was that your answer to my question? Stress is subjective, however. Your stress could be my highlight. One thing is true: our health is closely related to how we cope with stress.

Much of our emotional well-being depends upon our coping abilities. A loss of a loved one, a pet, a job, a home, etc., triggers a mourning and grieving process. Nature and nurture go hand in hand. Flowers and memorial gardens foster the continuity of life beyond ourselves. We can literally lose ourselves in our garden.

Social interaction is another benefit of gardening. We love to share plants, seeds, advice, experience, and often our gardens.

Exercise is an added plus. Gardening is a good workout. Relatively light work, such as weeding, trimming, or raking burns about 300 calories an hour. Digging, hauling mulch, and heavier work not only burns calories but improves muscle tone and bone strength. Just being outside in the sunshine gives us the opportunity to get vitamin D naturally. This helps our bodies absorb calcium. Researchers have found that regular exercise relieves depression and improves cognitive abilities in middle-aged and older people. Is this your answer for why you garden? It makes you feel good.

The garden allows us to engage all our senses. Sensory stimulation is vital to healthy human functioning. Probably the sensory appeal is basic to the garden's appeal. The feel of your hands in the soil, the feel of the rough tree bark, the feel of soft petal in your hands is wonderful. Inhaling the sweet scent of jasmine, the smell of the soil after a rain, the aroma of mint is delightful. The taste of a fresh tomato, a freshly picked apricot, a sun-warmed peach are heavenly. Hearing the rustle of grasses and the chirping of birds and the humming of hummingbird wings is unforgettable. Seeing the bud open, the deep color of your geranium, the bounty of your vegetable garden is awe inspiring.

Going beyond the physical benefits, the garden offers unlimited creative possibilities. This is a unique chance to stimulate your intellect. There is always something to learn. With every lesson comes a greater understanding of nature's ways, a deep sense of satisfaction, and often a healthier garden and gardener. Maintaining good levels of physical and mental activity helps to ward off Alzheimer's disease.

It is simply gratifying to nurture something. It is comforting to tend to something that responds so readily to our care. Who can fail to marvel at the ability of a tiny seed to sprout and grow and present us with divine blossoms,
yummy salad ingredients, or an umbrella of shade? I feel this is the overwhelming answer to my question of why you garden.

Gardens can also give us a sense of control. This is important when we often feel that there are so many things beyond our control. Of course, we cannot control nature, but in our gardens, we can control what to plant, when to plant and where to plant.

As we realize that our health is meshed with the planet's health, we understand that in restoring a small section of the earth in our gardens, we also restore ourselves.

COME JOIN THE MASTER GARDENERS FOR AN “ALTERNATIVE GARDENING WORKSHOP”, SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2005, 10:00 A.M. TO 12:00 NOON AT THE MOHAVE AGRICULTURE CENTER, 101 E BEALE ST., KINGMAN. LEARN ABOUT: UPSIDE-DOWN PLANTING, EARTH BOXES, HAY BALE GARDENING, RAISED BEDS, GARBAGE BAG GARDENING. This workshop is free and open to the public, no reservations required.

For more information contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman or telephone 928-753-3788.

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