

## Healthy Lifestyle Through Home Gardening: The Art of Sharing

**Abstract:** *This article offers a solution to promoting healthy lifestyle through home gardening and how gardening activities create social capital through social interactions among family members and people within communities, through sharing. This article begins by reviewing general social, psychological, and physical health benefits of home gardening followed by barriers associated with starting a garden that include lack of time, scarce resources, insufficient knowledge and skills, and inadequate space. This article argues that beyond the skills and knowledge, inspiration is the key in creating and sustaining a home garden. Through the idea of networking with families in a community and building these social relationships, it increases more opportunities to inspire and be inspired, fosters a greater sense of joy in gardening, encourages a chain reaction of sharing, and connects people together. As people share, it creates a pattern of social interactions and reciprocity among those who share and the recipients within the network that will then lead to increased social relationships, trust, and a social norm of sharing. Sharing itself also creates an opportunity*



*for others to share back because in some situations, people do not know how to initiate the sharing process or have difficulty doing so. The article ends with a discussion on promoting a sustainable, active, and healthy lifestyle by engaging children in the process of gardening and sharing germinated plants/produce with their peers and other families, hence fostering a lifelong appreciation and consumption of plants they grow, learn, share, and heal together in the process.*

**Keywords:** gardening; home garden network; healthy and active lifestyle; social capital; sharing; social network; gardening inspiration

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### Gardening's Benefits

Gardening offers numerous benefits that are often overlooked in a time where convenience, instant gratification, and ease of accessibility tend to be the valued habit or mindset. Benefits of gardening include greater food security especially in areas of high poverty, healthier and tastier food options, saving

 Additionally, intergenerational learning during home gardening can deepen family relationships and increase social capital. 

*"One of the sounds heard most often in the Kitchen Garden is laughter. People smile, talk, and share stories. The pace of life slows as stems are*

*money, and allowing for more outdoor exposure.<sup>1</sup> The gardening process also actively involves youth while offering opportunities for increased physical*

activity that can gradually lead to a decrease in obesity and better nutritional and academic learning outcomes for students as well as nature-based learning in school gardens.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, intergenerational learning during home gardening can deepen family relationships and increase social capital.<sup>3</sup>

Gardening also increases creativity and inspiration; positively improves participants' mental well-being, establishes trust and close connections, and increases cultural awareness; helps create a sense of home, cultural identity, and belonging; and provides a safe, encouraging place to acquire new knowledge while learning more about gardening.<sup>4</sup> In addition to serving as food sources and places of learning, gardens can also be used as memorial spaces, a gathering place for cultural celebrations, and as places of healing. The literature has shown that home gardens have 3 significant impacts. First, they establish a connection between gardening and psychological well-being. Second, gardens are time capsules of past memories that reintroduce familiar landscapes, trees, plants, and social relationships. Finally, home gardens are personal and are meant to be personalized. They give people a license to express their individual cultural and creative identities that reflect their values, passions, and gardening preferences.<sup>5</sup>

Typically, home gardens exist in both rural and urban spaces in small garden plots around the household, encompass a diversity of plants (vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs, medicinal plants, etc), and are usually maintained by household members.<sup>6</sup> However, there are different types of unconventional home garden styles depending on space availability such as kitchen gardens that utilize pots and trays for planting inside the home. In Punjab, Pakistan, the "Kitchen Gardening Project" was implemented by the Punjab government in 2010-2011 to assess the role and effectiveness of kitchen gardening toward food security within the Bahawalpur district. From this study, the results showed that the gardening project was able to provide

cost-affordable and high-quality food items, and 82% of the growers who were given seed kits by the project grew the vegetables for their own daily consumption. This case study illustrates the benefits of home gardening, especially with regard to food insecurity in areas with a rapid population increase, an increase in poverty rates, and a greater need for fresh, low-cost food options in urban and suburban areas.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas people understand all these benefits, studies have shown that barriers exist when creating home gardens. These barriers include lack of time, scarce resources, insufficient knowledge and skills, inadequate space, and dwindling inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Various programs, such as Kitchen Gardening Project in Pakistan, have been developed to increase knowledge and skills in gardening both at homes and in communities. Some land-grant universities, which account for a little more than a hundred of them in the United States, have Education and Extension Service (or community engagement programs in mainly agriculture) to provide hands-on agricultural skills and knowledge to families and communities through specialists and agents.

### Beyond the Knowledge and Skills: Inspiration Matters

Although skills and knowledge are necessary tools in creating successful family and community gardening programs similar to the Kitchen Gardening Project, studies have also shown that without inspiration, program longevity weakens and its impact reaches a limited number of people. According to the study, when participants were asked about their gardening experience and if it helped the health of their family, 94.9% of participants reported that it did, and 92.3% of participants had also encouraged other families to start their own gardens.<sup>8</sup> Participants need to be inspired to have the desire to create and care for a garden in the first place, and through the idea of networking with other participants and

building these social relationships, it increases more opportunities to inspire and be inspired, fosters a greater sense of joy in gardening, encourages a chain reaction of sharing, and connects people together. Therefore, good social support and larger social connections lead to more sustainable results.

In addition, it also changes the way participants view gardening from an activity that was once a solitary, unwanted task (because of one not having enough time, lack of space, and unawareness) to a positive, community effort that is rewarding and that would eventually be shared with either future generations within the family or with another family. On March 2009, former first lady Michelle Obama started the White House's first vegetable garden on the South Lawn as part of her "Let's Move!" campaign to improve childhood nutrition in the United States. The gardening program inspired people, families, and communities across the nation to start their own gardens, its major success being attributed to the value of community-driven gardening to create change. In Obama's award-winning book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*, she writes, "One of the sounds heard most often in the Kitchen Garden is laughter. People smile, talk, and share stories. The pace of life slows as stems are clipped, plants are tied and weeds are pulled. Without anyone expecting it, our garden has become a community garden, connecting people from all different backgrounds, ages and walks of life. We all share in its care and in its success."<sup>9(p86)</sup>

Similar to Obama's Kitchen Garden concept, programs elsewhere such as on the University of Hawaii at Manoa where food security is the state's primary concerning issue, have been developed to provide awareness, joy, and inspiration through edible gardens; for instance, SOFT (Student Organic Farm Training) is a student-run program located in the center of the university campus where anyone can plant, help, and collect the produce for free.<sup>10</sup> Other programs, such as Home Garden

Network, use a network for families and friends in Hawaii as a resource to develop edible home gardens for one family's home at a time for everyone within the network to enjoy and share their own fresh produce.<sup>11</sup>

### A Circle of Sharing That Encourages Joy and More Sharing

Research has shown that one of the most satisfying factors in gardening is the opportunity among the gardeners to share the produce with friends and colleagues.<sup>12</sup> As one participant in the study mentioned, "I give away tomato. . . I enjoy it because when I reap, my friends come and share . . . they give me warm reception."<sup>12(p97)</sup> The idea of sharing extends beyond produce to ideas, tools, foods, knowledge, cultures, and stories.<sup>13</sup> Patel<sup>14</sup> noted that produce sharing helps stimulate friendship building. As people share, it creates a pattern of social interactions and reciprocity<sup>15</sup> among those who share and the recipients within the network that will then lead to increased social relationships, trust, and a social norm of sharing.<sup>16</sup> In sociology, this type of dynamic is called social capital<sup>17</sup>—the idea that intangible resources result from a network of good relationships between people in a community, create resources for, and empower each member within the network to achieve a certain goal—in this case, an active and healthy lifestyle through gardening.

Whereas sharing produce creates social capital among the gardeners, it is also a way for the sharers to express an act of kindness and a joy of their life without having to verbally express them. This has benefits because in some cultures, people tend to avoid expressing or sharing good news or positive experiences, in fear of feeling guilty when others may be going through a difficult time.<sup>18</sup> Thus, as an act of kindness, sharing produce with friends, neighbors, or colleagues allows one to engage in prosocial behavior as well as express personal joy to the recipients. Prosocial behavior has been shown to be linked to happiness.<sup>19</sup> Research also showed that sharing positive experiences

and joy with others increases happiness and life satisfaction.<sup>20</sup> Even among children as young as 8 years old, research has shown that those who shared (half of their endowment) were happier than those who did not share.<sup>21</sup>

Sharing itself also creates an opportunity for others to share back because in some situations, people do not know how to initiate the sharing process or have difficulty doing so. A study with 145 older adults in rural North Carolina on the meaning of food sharing concluded that these elders valued food sharing as a way to maintain the social norm of reciprocity. Those engaging in this kind of reciprocal relationship are provided with the opportunity to express their joy of sharing all at the same time, allowing them to be mindful and proactive about when or what to share, and with continuity, it becomes a norm of maintaining an active and mindful lifestyle for all involved.<sup>15</sup>

### Sustainable Active and Healthy Lifestyle Starting With Children's Sharing

Beginning at an early age, children are often encouraged to share. Typically, this sharing involves children parting with an item they already own, such as a toy, and allowing other children to borrow that toy for an allotted amount of time before returning it to the original owner. When children share and cooperate, they often gain social rewards such as praise and affection, reaffirming the behavior of sharing.<sup>22</sup> The sharing is occurring by one child taking from another and then returning what they took, but what if sharing could focus on the giving rather than the receiving? One way this could be achieved is through promoting the sharing of plants as alternative gifts for friends or family members.

Gardening is quite beneficial to children's physical, cognitive, and motor development.<sup>23</sup> Moving tools, digging in the soil, and feeling the dirt in their palms are all experiences that add to the physical development of children. Literacy can improve through reading and learning plant names and processes.

The most significant benefit that can arise from gardening is increased social capital and connections. As children work together to plant and create something meaningful, the result is an improved bond between them. Additionally, gardening can be a great opportunity for parents and children to spend uninterrupted quality time together. The connections can be strengthened even further through exchanging and sharing these germinated plants. Sharing plants is a gift that has longevity and purpose behind it. These plants could last years and provide fruits and vegetables to children and their families, further fostering appreciation for giving and gardening.

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