



## Gardening for the Soul

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Stressed? Our daily grind, obligations, and commutes can really take a toll on our well-being. We come and go as time just slips by. We *literally* need to take the time to stop and smell the roses.

Since ancient times the healing, qualities of gardens have been recognized. In the middle Ages, restorative gardens provided serene settings where patients could heal physically and mentally. Today many hospitals and Health Centers utilize healing gardens. Therapeutic benefits of plants are significant. There is an entire profession devoted to it. *Horticultural Therapy* improves bodies, minds, and spirits as people take part in planting, growing, and caring for plants. It is used in many different venues such as nursing homes, hospitals, prisons, and schools. It is useful for all ages and abilities.

Naturalist Henry David Thoreau is quoted “Nature is but another name for health”. Studies have proven that being in a natural environment reduces blood pressure, heart rate and results in stress reduction. Hospital stays tend to be shorter when healing gardens or some type of horticulture therapy is incorporated. Other benefits include pain reduction, memory and concentration improvement, eases emotional pain, and encourages social interaction. Maintaining and watching the growth process from seed to flowering plant also provides a sense of accomplishment.

With the pace and the stresses of life, it is important to find your own place to relax and recuperate. To be effective we need to take the time to refresh. A *personal* healing space can be as simple as a container of colorful flowers, a potted plant, or a tabletop fountain.

Here are some tips to transform your own yard or garden into a meaningful retreat. Provide a place to sit and contemplate. Give yourself some privacy from hedge or fence. Include a statue, rock or other focal point for meditation. Add a touch of whimsy to make you smile. Simplicity is essential in designing a soothing healing garden. Clean the clutter. Do some research to see what plants work best in your area and what to avoid.

Engage the senses. Scent is very powerful. Add fragrant plants alongside garden seating and along paths. Creeping thyme, will release aroma when walked on. Incense and scented oils in garden torches add additional scents. Tingle your taste buds with edible fruits, vegetables and herbs. The Sense of Sound also broadens the garden experience. Incorporate elements that will attract wildlife like berry-producing shrubs, birdbaths and feeders. You can also add chimes and sounds of flowing water with fountains.

Color provides a visual stimulus while adding focal points and accents to a garden. Warm colors such as red, orange, and yellow are energizing and promote activity. Cool colors, such as blue, purple, and white are calming, and promote tranquility.

Medicinal plants can are often used in therapeutic gardens. Lavender and Echinacea for example, have medicinal uses but are more often grown for the long bloom time, beautiful flowers, low maintenance, and attracts wildlife.

It is your own special place so think of what appeals to you. Personalize it by incorporating things that trigger positive memories. Pick up garden trinkets while vacationing. Use meaningful symbols and homemade decorations.

Finally, when you enter your healing space take a deep breath. Slow down and become mindful of it all. Take in the beauty of nature and let it fill you with peace. This quote from Hans Christian Anderson says so much “Just living is not enough... One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.”

*For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office, 301-600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.*

