More than a Green Thumb:
The Benefits of Gardening

Spending time outdoors can greatly improve your mental and physical health. If you're thinking we mean strenuous exercise like rock climbing or hiking, think again. Something as simple as gardening can have a big impact on your well-being.

The physical benefits of gardening are pretty obvious. Standing, bending, kneeling, digging – gardening is good exercise! Gardening can burn off approximately 300 calories per hour and all that movement can improve muscle tone and strength.

But as you age, it's important that you not only take care of your physical health, but you need to take care of your emotional health as well. That's where gardening comes in. Numerous studies have also shown that regular gardening can have a positive impact on mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression (one of the leading mental health problems affecting older adults).

Even if you've never had a "green thumb," you'll reap the mental health benefits from planting and nurturing your very own garden. Here's why gardening is so good for your emotional health:

- **Reduces stress.** According to a study in the Journal of Health Psychology, gardening can lower cortisol levels in your brain. Cortisol is known as the "stress hormone." Too much cortisol can negatively affect your blood pressure and glucose levels.

- **Naturally incorporates mindfulness.** Mindfulness, the process of being aware of the present moment without judgement, has been shown to improve the symptoms of depression and anxiety. Gardening allows you to be fully in the moment.

- **Provides a sense of purpose.** A healthy garden needs attention. You have to get outside on a regular basis to tend to your garden.

- **It can be fulfilling.** When you take good care of a garden, it pays you back with beautiful blooms and a bountiful harvest that will make you proud.

- **A calming effect on the brain.** When we slow down and take in the beauty of our natural surroundings, we not only feel invigorated but our mental performance improves, too.

- **Provides social opportunities.** If you share a garden with a neighbor or volunteer at a community garden, it will help you stay connected to other people, which is an important part of healthy aging and can help stave off depression.

- **May reduce the risk of dementia.** One study showed that gardening could lower the risk for dementia. This could be because gardening requires the use of many critical functions, including dexterity and sensory awareness.

- **Does wonders for your mood and your health.** Lots of fresh air and sunshine not only cause your body to produce vitamin D, but it also boosts the serotonin levels in your brain which improves your mood and helps you feel calm and centered. But be smart and remember to wear sunscreen.

Springtime is the perfect time to reap the health benefits of gardening. If you don't have a yard, consider planting a "container garden" on your porch or patio. Researchers from NASA found that gardening, even in small pots, kept astronauts happy in the harsh environment of outer space. (It works here on Earth, too.)

Whether you choose to grow flowers, fruits, herbs or vegetables in the ground or in pots -- gardening can enhance your life in so many ways. **Happy gardening!**