

Turf Trivia

Health Benefits From Lawns

"Today almost everyone living in the urbanized centers of the western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent" [Hossein 1968].

Americans have become more health conscious in the 1980s even as urban living abuses to physical and mental health seem to increase daily. Problems have become more complex and more difficult to cope with.

The media regularly features headlines about health hazards, over which individuals have little control. Concerns about water, food and air pollution have mounted to near panic levels at times from the feeling that disaster is about to strike.

It is important to see what we have in nature that is working for us, providing health and environmental benefits that are often overlooked. Survival and health of humankind are based on an understanding of nature and her processes.

Professor Patrick Horsbrough, professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, considers the proximity of plants to people as a psychological imperative [Horsbrough 1972].

Seeking the benefits nature provides is necessary for our own well-being.

Keeping a lawn free of insect and disease damage provides a dense turfgrass cover which can yield many health benefits. Use of the new cultivars gives vigor to the turf. When needed, the careful use of pesticides will help to give a thick turfgrass cover which not only will be more beautiful but will help to cut back on noise, modify the temperature, reduce glare and help control allergens, which are some of the environmental stressors which add to daily living discomfort. Plants are not a cure-all to ten-

sions and personal problems, but "involvement with plants can help you cope" [McDonald 1976].

Roadside rest stops, parks, cemeteries and home lawns are all conducive to good health because they provide settings that calm us, create a sense of well-being and help to reduce stress. Over 4000 members of the American Horticulture Society were surveyed as to the benefits of gardening.

Over 60 percent stated the most important satisfaction as "peacefulness and tranquillity." Taking care of a lawn, like other gardening activities, "is a process which includes all the thought, actions and responses which occur from the time a gardening activity is first contemplated, through the planting and growth of seeds, to the enjoyment of the mature plant" [Lewis 1978].

In addition, lawn tending provides the best in walking, bending and lifting exercise that help to promote good health. Out-of-doors gardening is more enjoyable to many than physical fitness workouts indoors. The soft, resilient cushioning attributes of turf allow outside activities to be safe and more enjoyable.

Plants affect people's moods. A lawn can create feelings of happiness, thoughtfulness, peace, serenity, privacy or sadness, depending on our association with their use — city park, golf course, home lawn or memorial park.

Where vegetation grows, child mortality, suicide and energy consumption are less than in places where there are no plants [Schery 1976].

Watching grass grow and respond to the seasons may be for city people a last link to the solace and understanding our vanishing wilderness once gave.

The therapeutic value of gardening has been recognized since ancient Greece. Hippocrates' famous work on *Airs, Waters and Place* recognized "that man's life, in sickness and in health, is bound up

with the forces of nature..." [McHarg 1971].

In the 18th century, mental hospitals in Spain prescribed gardening as therapy [McGrath 1987].

Today Horticultural Therapy has become an important professional specialty in the rehabilitation of the ill, the elderly, the chemically dependent, the handicapped, the incarcerated and school dropouts. "Gardening as a normal activity is used as a tool to achieve treatment goals" [Fearing 1978].

There is a growing body of evidence that personal health is linked with the person's beliefs, inner-space or psychological landscape [Lewis 1978].

A person who takes pride in helping plants to grow, and in nursing plants back to health after they have declined, starts to regain belief in themselves, establishing a level of pride, confidence and self-worth that can help in the healing process.

Those who work on lawns and in nurseries and greenhouses show a high degree of respect for these areas and gain a feeling of accomplishment.

Working with plants has helped in cases where people have been hospitalized for severe depression so this type of activity can be of use in combating normal everyday blues [McDonald 1976].

New skills are learned through these activities which build enthusiasm for life, overcome boredom and ease the mind. The excitement generated by watching and helping plants grow can make patients feel that they have overcome their disability.

A person who has been ill often loses the power to focus on tasks at hand. When a person focuses on the tasks associated with growing plants, their power of concentration is enhanced. This important quality can be transferred to other tasks and increase the individual's productivity [McGrath 1987].

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It has been noted that the recovery rate among hospitalized patient when their rooms viewed landscaped areas is often quicker than among patients who have non-landscaped views [Weyerhaeuser 1986].

The restorative qualities of turf and other plants provide a healing experience for people that is real [Stainbrook 1973].

Plants are non-threatening as they respond to care by everyone; they have natural inner rhythms which can teach us lessons about our own lives. In patients who are overcome with a feeling of failure, plants offer paths to success [Autry 1986].

Heightened socialization is noted among nursing home patients who are exposed to plants. Evidence is strong that involvement in lawn care and other gardening activities not only benefits the individual gardener but that it serves to

connect people in a positive way.

Neighborliness increases in places where residents become involved in gardening. A new spirit rises which can impact the community and bring people together [Lewis 1978].

When you take care of lawns and gardens, you also take care of yourself. Plants are a creative life force which can offer many benefits to those who are strong and well, as well as to those who need medical care. We cannot exist on this earth without plant life. As we learn more about plants, we find hope for the future and reassurance in today [McDonald 1976].

"Grasses and people get on truly good together" [Wilson 1961].

Editors Note: This article concludes the Turfgrass Trivia series.

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