



Photo courtesy of the Fairmont

Green peace

By Barbara Edie

What's good for the soil may be good for the soul. While many gardeners will tell you that a little fresh air, dirt under your nails and planting that new bed of perennials is better than therapy, research suggests time in nature actually IS therapy. Studies show that simply looking at trees and nature scenes reduces stress, lowers blood pressure and relieves muscle tension. According to the Canadian Horticultural Therapy Association, gardening can produce endorphin highs similar to those induced by jogging and cycling (and perhaps chocolate, but that wasn't part of the study).

Indeed, taking time to smell the roses seems to calm the nerves and soothe the senses. A study of Alzheimer patients in

British Columbia, showed that at residences with gardens, the rate of violent incidents decreased by 19 per cent over two years; while residences without gardens saw a significant increase in violent incidents. These calming effects of nature may also explain why physicians in ancient Egypt prescribed walks in the garden for the mentally ill.

Beyond the mental health benefits, gardening can also provide a good physical work-out. Digging, pulling weeds, raking leaves and pushing a lawn mower around the yard not only burn calories but may help build bone mass and help prevent osteoporosis. Research at the University of Arkansas found that women who garden weekly have stronger bones than those who are inactive or who jog, swim or walk. The study of more than 3,000 women, aged 50 years and older, found that only two

activities correlated with higher bone density – weight training and yard work.

Added to this healthy outdoor living, are the benefits of being out in the sun such as increased Vitamin D production, which helps the body absorb calcium. Gardeners may also exercise more, or remain physically active longer, because it's an activity they enjoy. For many gardeners, hauling earth, mulch and plants around the yard only ends when it snows! (And then there's all that shovelling to do.)

Whether gardeners are 'happier' than most is hard to say, but getting back to their roots appears to improve their health. And an increased interest in home gardening suggests many of us are looking for an escape from the daily stresses of life as we search for a little bit of green peace. ●