

Gardening in the Golden Years: Growing old and staying young

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Gardener Mac Gray working on the Zoo Plot at Charmaine Nymann Community Garden
October, 2023 Photo by BCGA Gardener Candice Hall

It was planting season when Colorado Springs resident John Poyzer traded his worn-out knee for a new one a few years ago. No problem when it came to his favorite pastime. A walker joined

the rake, shovel and other tools that accompany the almost-80-year-old to his longtime community garden plot.

“I had my surgery the first part of April, and our target to plant is mid-May, when things are warming up and seeds germinate,” he said. “I was able to get my walker moving up and down the rows we were planting and use a hoe to make little trenches to drop seeds and fertilizer in. I could do most things, but a little slower than normal.”

Poyzer and his wife have leased a 20-foot-by-40-foot bed at the Charmaine Nymann Community Garden every spring since 1985 and didn’t want to miss one minute of the couple’s cherished time at the neighborhood hub that pulses with activity.

Birds chirp and dew glistens early in the cool mornings, when they prefer to dig in the fertile soil and coax tomatoes, zucchinis, carrots, beans, radishes, onions, potatoes and lettuce to flourish.

Poyzer believes the routine helped speed recovery from his knee replacement.

“You watch things getting green and seeds you’ve planted pop up,” he said. “In a way, it was probably therapy.”

The physical, mental and spiritual benefits of gardening can help people stay young while they grow old in their golden years — which research shows and many avid hobbyists attest to.

What with pushing a wheelbarrow, busy-bee walking, bending to prepare soil, plant, weed and harvest crops, and breathing abundant fresh air, the labor provides an excellent way of maintaining fitness while aging, said Master Gardener Larry Stebbins.

“They always tell you when you get older to keep moving,” he said. “This keeps us moving with low-impact aerobics, for the most part.”

Garden center shoppers often sport white or blue hair because seniors have discovered that digging in the dirt can be one of the fountains of youth.

Another physical benefit is that sunlight supplies a dose of vitamin D, Stebbins noted, and mingling with micro-organisms in the soil can release serotonin in humans. The natural chemical relieves depression and strengthens the immune system.

And health-conscious seniors like growing their own nutritious vegetables, he said.

Fresh is best, agrees Candice Hall, who worked in the medical field before retiring two and a half years ago.

She gardens first and foremost to raise and savor just-picked organic produce.

But the beauty surrounding the area where Hall lays hands on the fertile Charmaine Nymann Community Garden land also soothes her soul.

“I am overwhelmed by the scenic vistas of Bear Creek Community Park,” she said.

A heartfelt memory is of a prolific gardener whose ill health restricted her gardening to just a few weeks.

“Without speaking to each other, a number of us tended her plot in her absence, trying to maintain her standards, until late summer when we sent cosmos flowers grown on her plot to her memorial,” Hall said.

Socialization is an important facet of community gardening for seniors who may be otherwise isolated or lonely, said Stebbins, founder of Pikes Peak Urban Gardens, a defunct nonprofit that built 12 community gardens in Colorado Springs.

It’s a “third place,” he said, one that rounds out socialization of mature adults after family, friends and church circles.

For Stebbins, gardening is as vital as breathing and sleeping. It’s a need in his life that keeps him going, and while he’s a dual retiree as a former educator and nonprofit leader, he continues to teach public gardening classes and provide consultation services to businesses, schools and nonprofits.

“Gardening becomes a craving,” Stebbins said. His runs neck-and-neck with apple pie.

The time spent enveloped in the lushness of nature’s cycles, sharing the love of the activity with strangers who quickly become new friends, and the sheer satisfaction of being able to grow something with one’s own efforts are rewarding beyond measure for many.

Stebbins thinks that actress Audrey Hepburn summed it up best, when she said, “To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”

Community garden plots available

Colorado Springs has several community gardens in neighborhoods throughout the area.

The Pikes Peak region’s oldest and largest, The Charmaine Nymann Community Garden at Bear Creek Regional Park off 21st and West Rio Grande streets, has plots for lease for the upcoming growing season.

The 2-acre organic vegetable garden features 104 plots that are operated by the Bear Creek Garden Association and includes water hookups on site.

Seasonal fees for are \$120 for a 20-foot-by-40-foot bed and \$75 for a 20-foot-by-20-foot bed, which includes tilling in early spring, water expenses, and repair and maintenance services. A 5-foot-tall fence with seven gates encloses the area.

Call (719) 329-8873 to inquire about a plot.