

Living through Covid-19  
By Jim Bliss

We are living through a crazy time, sheltering in place and wondering when things will start to change for the better. For most of us though, normal is just outside our door. Our gardens, no matter how large or small, can provide us with the touchstone that allows us to put aside our situation and regain a proper perspective on the world around us. University studies, like those at Texas A&M and Wisconsin State University, all point to the beneficial psychological and physical benefits indoor and outdoor plants have on us.

So, what about my garden? Just a few pots on my patio we might say. One study has shown that just touching a plant creates an unconscious calming effect, so a little dead heading or repotting is going to reduce your stress level and help bring your perspective of the world around you into better balance.

Just sitting surrounded by trees and flowers has been shown to speed up the healing process and strengthen the immune system. The benefits of an herb and flower garden now take on new meaning. Not only can you illuminate your house with cut flowers but you can have rosemary chicken for dinner. Even our grandmothers knew that was good for us. This connection between health and gardens is strong enough that hospitals and places like our own UC Davis, have created “wellness gardens” to help foster psychological healing and balance.

Living through the Covid-19 crisis is traumatic, whether or not we are fully aware of it. Just spending time in a vegetable garden is therapeutic and helps us deal with the trauma of our times. It puts you in touch with creation itself. There is something miraculous about a sprouting seed that cannot fail to touch your heart, and when that zucchini or tomato finally ends up nourishing you, and your family or friends, you know that life will triumph, and you have a place in creation.

As newly-minted Master Gardeners, my wife and I spend a great deal of time outdoors. What we are trying to do is to create a space for ourselves in the midst of madness. We have a water garden where our turtle, Plop, sticks her nose up looking for food as soon as we sit down. The finches scold us for getting too close to the feeder while the water trickles slowly into the pond. There, I find a place of peace where I can experience myself as a part of a greater whole. I find a better perspective to be gained in the midst of a garden we have created, shadowed by oak trees that were there long before we came and will be there long after we have gone.

So where can I find such a place if all I have is a small cement patio outside of my apartment? You can get three 5-gallon buckets, punch some holes in the bottom and fill them with potting mix. Plant veggies or pansies from seed or starts or a great patio plant, a mint of some kind; peppermint, chocolate mint, or my own favorite, spearmint. Crush a few leaves in your tea or inhale the great aroma and the world is a better place. Mint is really easy to grow. If you ignore it and it wilts just add water and it springs right back. If you are still unsure of what to do, call the Master Gardener hot line: 209-533-5912.

If that fails, take a walk around Sonora. There are whole forests full of trees, wildflower meadows and quaint streets where the roses hang over the fences. Gardens are everywhere, and they are places where our spirit can become grounded in the earth from which we were created.

So, if you feel that the difficulties surrounding us threaten to become overwhelming stop, get into the garden - yours or someone else's, and take time to stop and smell the flowers. It is good for your soul, especially in these troubled times.

*Rev. Dr Jim Bliss is a recent graduate from the Master Gardener Program of the University of California Cooperative Extension of Tuolumne County.*

*UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: [http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master\\_Gardeners/](http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/) You can also find us on Facebook.*