

WHAT'S GARDENING GOOD FOR?

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Up against the big pressing problems of our time – the economy, terrorism and war just to name a few – gardening seems, well, *trivial*. It's not going to turn the economy around. It's not going to provide us with thousands of good jobs. It's not going to transform our political and economic systems. It's not going to bring peace and security. Given this, we might well ask: *What's gardening good for?*

And here are a few more questions we might ask, given the tremendous squeeze on taxpayers these days, and on the resources that government has to spend on public services and programs: Why should educational organizations like Cornell University and Cornell Cooperative Extension, organizations that are funded in large part with people's hard-earned tax dollars, be involved in gardening? Can gardening be a medium for meaningful education—that is, for education that really matters? If so, what kind of education, and what is *it* good for?

From interviews across New York State, Peters found:

- **Gardening is about people. It's about the earth.** It's about the connection of people and the earth and how they're interrelated, and how they depend on one another. The earth depends on the people to do the right thing for it, and the people are depending on the earth to give them bounty and beauty. If you sign on as a Master Gardener, you'll be signing onto the work of caring for the earth and of educating others to do the same. (*Renee Schloupt, Broome County, NY*)
- **Gardening is a great medium to improve the quality of life** for individuals and communities, which is a whole lot like the extension mission. There is nothing like gardening for giving people something they can achieve themselves with no or minimal money. It encourages cooperation, enhances understandings of interactions at all levels, from plant-people interaction to all other forms of life. And it teaches skills that range from personal awareness to science concepts to patience to the phenomenon of cause and effect, meaning that the things you do have positive or negative results. Horticulture isn't just another subject matter. It's the big one. It's a huge medium for larger societal and individual growth. If you ever lack faith in humanity, hang out with some Master Gardeners; they usually bring out the best. They are a positive bunch of people. They believe in next spring. (*Sally Cunningham, Erie County, NY*)
- **Gardening is about participation, involvement and "ownership."** In a community-based gardening project, you want it to be a "we" effort. How can we involve so many people, that people will feel that it's their garden? It isn't identified as one person's project. Everyone, *everyone* owns it. If we all work together toward a common vision, we can do something extraordinary. Something extraordinary may just be a small garden. But for a community that hasn't had a success in a while, it's a really big deal. It's good for people's souls. It provides beauty and food. We can celebrate it and have celebration and events around it. Our children can reconnect with nature, see a butterfly, watch a bird feed. The benefits are also from participating in the process, what we learned about each other and how we all have a role. It can bring support into a community that wasn't there before. It can be a catalyst through which other good things happened in the community, as a direct result. (*Marcia Eames-Sheavly, Cornell University*)

- **Gardening is about more than numbers.** Private industry is all about numbers. If the numbers go up, everything is fine. It doesn't matter if everybody in the place is suffering or not. Here, we want to improve the community. We want to help people to make the right decisions in their life. We want to teach them to have a healthier attitude, to eat healthier, to be healthier towards their neighbors, and to embrace and protect the beautiful natural environment that they have around them. In between the TV and the movies, we get taken in by horrible images and horrible versions of reality. We need to have some other good information in there, too – that people cooperate with each other and do good things, and people are more concerned about helping their community than they are about building their bank account. Relationships with each other in the community are more important than having a huge amount of money and buying a huge house and big cars. (*Rick Burstell, Greene County, NY*)

The last observation is reminiscent of something Liberty Hyde Bailey, the founding leader of Cornell's extension work in New York State, wrote almost a hundred years ago when the extension idea was new. Bailey wrote:

“The ultimate welfare of the community does not depend on the balance-sheets of a few industries, but on the character of the people, the moral issues, the nature of home life, the community pride, the public spirit, the readiness of responses to calls for aid, the opportunities of education and recreation and entertainment and cooperative activity as well as of increased daily work and better wages.”¹

Finally, [in capturing] the spirit of extension, what is your role as Master Gardeners in giving it life and carrying it forward? The spirit of extension is really nothing more—and nothing less—than the human spirit, dedicated and directed to the pursuit of the “ultimate welfare of the community.”

Beyond becoming knowledgeable about horticulture and gardening, beyond sharing your knowledge and expertise with the citizens of this state, Master Gardeners' role is to keep the spirit alive that is dedicated to the ultimate welfare of people, of communities, of the earth. Your role is to awaken inspiration and hope, to teach civic and environmental responsibility, and, not least, to spread an infectious joy and love and reverence for the beauty and the simple but profoundly important pleasures to be found in people's own backyards and neighborhoods.

Liberty Hyde Bailey in 1928 also wrote:

Any enterprise closely associated with homes and that hopefully employs the leisure of multitudes of people is worthy of investigations and researches conducted at public expense. It is a sad attitude of legislators and others that predicates the need of such investigations on the probable money earnings of the enterprises, as if there were no other measure of human life.²

Thank goodness there are, indeed, other measures of human life. Without diminishing the importance of the money earnings of the various enterprises of the world—including, of course, gardening and horticulture—a special part of your work is to teach these other measures, not by preaching about them, but by embodying them in who you are and what you do. You are more than gardeners and more than fact tellers – you are educators.

¹ Liberty Hyde Bailey, *Universal Service* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Co., 1918), pp. 151-152.

² Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Garden Lover* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 19.