

This page and opposite: Bernadette and Charlotte de Geyter use the garden at their family home in Antwerp both to relax and as a source of inspiration



By Grace Cain

Time spent *planting* and *pottering* can bring huge *benefits*, as one former sceptic has learned; seems mum really *does know* best...

Space to breathe

Ever since she brought me into this world, my mum has been telling me categorically that she is always right. For pretty much the same amount of time, I've been ignoring her. However – and I'm taking a big step by putting this in writing – she might just be right about gardens. Her relentless insistence that *my* mental wellbeing would vastly improve if I helped with the weeding in *her* garden may be blatantly self-serving, but the basic premise is not incorrect.

Recent research by the UK's Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has found that the more 'doses' of gardening you get, the better your physical and mental health. Participants who said they tend to their garden every day were found to have stress levels 4.2 per cent lower than those who didn't garden at all, with evidence that even a couple of plant-potting sessions a week can have an effect. "Gardening every day has the same positive impact on wellbeing as undertaking regular, vigorous exercise like cycling or running," explains RHS wellbeing fellow Dr Lauriane Chalmin-Pui. "When gardening, our brains are pleasantly distracted by nature around us. This shifts our focus away from ourselves and our stresses, thereby restoring our minds and reducing negative feelings."

I don't know if you've noticed, but the past couple of years have been a tad more stressful than usual – so perhaps it's no surprise that gardening has begun to outgrow its association with retirement villages and Monty Don. If you've been fortunate enough to stumble across the wild world of Garden TikTok (yes, it's a thing), you've probably witnessed the plant propagation powers of Marcus Bridgewater, AKA Garden Marcus. A quick scroll of the Texas-based plantfluencer's account is all you need to understand why he's been tagged 'the Bob Ross of gardening'. His videos – which range from tips on how to use a moisture meter, to repeated efforts to grow a sweet-potato plant – frequently compare plant care with self-care. In one of his most viewed posts, 'My Mental Health Routine', Bridgewater details the small rituals that he performs every morning. "I find myself looking at one of my planter experiments, and I am reminded that I'm ready to face my day with patience, kindness and positivity," he says in characteristically soothing tones.

Those who were lucky enough to sit out lockdown in a home with an outdoor space undoubtedly spent more time there than they would have done ordinarily. And while celebrity hairstylist Sam McKnight insisted he had always appreciated his northwest London garden, an extended period with none of his usual work or travel commitments certainly bought its significance into sharper focus. The joy he found in witnessing the



tinest changes in the branches of his magnolia trees or the blooms of his flowerbeds was a solace that he's still not relinquished. Click on McKnight's Instagram and – amid the high-fashion editorials and shots of the Hair by Sam McKnight haircare line – you'll find colourful vases filled with flowers and macro shots of roses, often accompanied by a cheery #goodmorning or an optimistic thought.

But then there's nothing new about creative people finding comfort or inspiration in their gardens: look at Yves Saint Laurent's famous Jardin Majorelle in Marrakech; or the lifelong adoration Christian Dior had for his mother's English-style garden in Normandy. And for many of us (at least in Europe), our very first introduction to art involves waterlilies or sunflowers.

Bernadette and Charlotte de Geyter, the mother-daughter duo behind fashion and homewares brand Bernadette, frequently seek creative respite in the garden of their family home in Antwerp. While Bernadette relaxes and tends to her roses, Charlotte can often be found snapping photos of flowers and foliage to use as inspiration for her paintings and print designs.

For them and their family, the garden is a peaceful place where they can unwind and spend time together. It's also where the duo first had the idea of taking Charlotte's prints and transforming them into a collection of ceramics. "During the first lockdown, we started dressing up and hosting our own private dinners in the garden – creating special moments," Charlotte remembers. "We found that we wanted more Bernadette." She compares the feeling of being in her mother's garden to being on vacation, with this the sensation she hopes to capture in her designs.

Of course, a visual impact is only one part of the horticultural story. Consider the world of the perfumer, where the garden is often the most logical place to reap new olfactory ideas. Alberto Morillas, the master perfumer >

“Alberto Morillas’ collaboration with Gucci’s Alessandro Michele is heavily informed by a love of the natural world”

Garden therapy

behind Swiss fragrance house Mizensir, has made a muse of the garden at his family home in Geneva. Its seasonal cycles of woody, green and herbaceous scents have provided the inspiration for Mizensir's aptly named Jardin du Parfumeur (or Perfumer's Garden), a collection of candles and room sprays.

Morillas' ongoing collaboration with Gucci's Alessandro Michele is also heavily informed by a love of the natural world. Each of the haute fragrances in The Alchemist's Garden range – a line of scents inspired by the ancient art of alchemy and designed to be layered together to create unique combinations – includes a raw botanical ingredient, such as iris or oud. With evocative names such as A Gloaming Night and The Last Day of Summer, each conjures a particular moment in nature.

Perfumer Christine Nagel also looked to the fantasy of a garden – the mysterious Garden of Eden on the Venetian island of Giudecca, to be exact – to create Un Jardin sur la Lagune for Hermès. Although it's not Nagel's personal garden, this secluded oasis came to represent something of a dream for her. It's considered a sort of holy grail among gardening enthusiasts because it's so difficult to access; even the Hermès office couldn't secure Nagel an invitation. Ultimately, she managed to gain permission to visit by handwriting a letter to the president of the garden's foundation. The next 18 months were spent translating the scents and sensations of this elusive place into a perfume that can be experienced by anyone. "To create this fragrance is to give this garden another life," says Nagel. "It is to enable everyone to open the gate and discover this secret oasis."

While I can't tell you for sure if gardening will prove the key to unlocking your creative potential or achieving inner peace, there is one thing I can guarantee: my mum will be incredibly pleased to hear that I'll be coming to help her do more weeding. It's got to be better than a gym class, right? □



From top: Yves Saint Laurent's famous Jardin Majorelle in Marrakech; Sam McKnight's London garden, an ongoing source of solace; Christian Dior takes pride of place in his mother's garden, now part of a museum



MINDFUL GARDENING TIPS

The woman in the know? Ozichi Brewster, therapeutic gardener at RHS Garden Bridgewater, Salford...

1. A wall of hanging baskets, troughs and containers can transform a bland fence or porch into a themed garden. Have fun selecting different plants to ensure a full year of colours, textures, smells and tastes. For example, you could start with tulips, hyacinths and violas for spring, followed by a summer display of petunias, begonias and fuchsias. Then go edible in autumn with wild strawberries, nasturtiums and chives, and continue into winter with ivy and pansies.
2. Growing food helps us to connect further with plants: not only their beauty, but the nutrition and benefit that they bring to our physical wellbeing. There's also a feeling of pride that comes with eating your own homegrown fruit or vegetables, whether it's herbs grown on your balcony or apples picked from trees in the garden. The added bonus is that you can easily share this particular aspect of gardening with your family and friends.
3. One of the joys of working at RHS Garden Bridgewater is being able to enjoy the beautiful trees and woodland. Just to sit among the trees is one of the best ways of reducing stress... you can really focus on the sights and sounds all around you: the wind gently displacing the leaves, the birds singing. It's the most pleasant way to practise mindfulness.
4. Visiting other gardens and parks, or even volunteering with a community garden project, are all great ways to engage with plants. You could even combine these excursions with another hobby, such as photography or art. Never underestimate the healing power of a quiet moment in nature.
5. We've seen a huge resurgence of interest in house plants since people have been spending more time indoors, and the need for extra greenery in our home has never been more important. House plants mimic the feeling of being outdoors and can help make a difference to your mood, from reducing stress levels to improving quality of sleep. If you have the space, big-leaved plants (such as monstera and banana plants) make a bold statement and bring a sense of calm to a room. If you want to add colour, orchids are a sure bet and can hold their flowers for weeks. Meanwhile, the striking patterned leaves of plants – including tradescantia, maranta and calathea – offer a feast for the eyes.

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