

# Gardening yields health benefits

Elizabeth Wells/CNS

Home gardens provide a ready source of fruit and vegetables packed with flavor and nutrients.

Yet, according to gardeners, the benefits of gardening, beyond taste and nutrition, include mental and physical health.

"My favorite thing to do early in the morning is to go out and work in the garden," said Joyce Merrill, member of St. Bonaventure Church in Columbus, Neb., who has multiple sclerosis.

"I have found (gardening) to be very relaxing and calming. When I'm out there, I have no other worry in the world," she said.

Her daughter, Vicki Maca, director of Catholic Charities' Omaha Campus for Hope in Omaha, Neb., said the garden has sustained her mother physically. "It's a big piece of her mental health and positive attitude."

The positive mental health benefits of gardening seem to be rooted in the parallels between gardens and life, said Maggie Kenney, a clinical social worker in the psychiatry department of Creighton University in Omaha.

"I think gardening is good because



you can set small goals and see concrete results," she said. "You have the opportunity to correct mistakes, overcome problems and experience loss."

Kenney said that when personal problems seem overwhelming and unsolvable, a garden's smaller-scale problems and progress offer an al-

ternative to despair.

Another positive aspect of gardening is witnessing firsthand the miracle of creation, said Mercy Sister Joan Martin, a registered nurse and cancer survivor.

"In gardening, there is a participation in God's creation in the sense that you are helping to promote it,"

## Health

she said, "but more in the heightened sense that God is the creator."

Being in either her large vegetable garden or one of her many flowerbeds provides a view to witness the interdependence of all creation and the cycle of life, Sister Martin said.

"What a powerful lesson — that we are on our way to another form of life, being transformed even as we are gardening. We are transformed day-by-day on our journey back to God," she said.

Sister Martin said she grows in hope as she sees the new life and death in her garden. Even on the days she received chemotherapy, "I would take my chemopack and go to work," she said. "I just knew the verdict wasn't in yet."

Merrill said the garden is where she says her morning prayers.

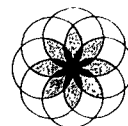
Prayer in the garden is a natural place to do that, said Kenney.

"Gardening allows us to use all of our senses, but it reminds us that there is a life process that is beyond our physical senses — God's creative power," she said.

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