

Garden On—It's Good for You

If you like to dig in the dirt in your yard, you are doing great things for your health already, maybe without even knowing it. This good news comes courtesy of Deb Logan, Executive Director of the Blue Zones Project—SWFL. In fact, a hobby of gardening hits four of the Blue Zones Project's "Power 9" principles, the guidelines that researchers found in common among the people who lived the longest, healthiest lives. Gardening hits these, if not more:

- Moving naturally. You'll be squatting, lifting, digging. The bonus is that gardening requires movements you probably won't otherwise do throughout your day.
- Downshifting. One study that Logan cites showed that when people spent 30 minutes gardening, their bodies had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.
- Having a sense of purpose. You're caring for something, even if it is a single tomato plant, and it will help you feel more connected.
- Eating more plants (if you're growing fruits and vegetables, that is). If you're growing your own, they taste fantastic and you are likely to eat more of them.

There's no need to be growing acres of crops. You may have a raised bed or container garden on a porch, or rows and rows of flowers and veggies. Whatever

your version of a garden is, it will help your health.

If you don't have room or the opportunity to have your own garden, you



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can also volunteer as a gardener. Logan cites additional research that people who work in community gardens have decreased isolation and risk of depression, because they meet other like-minded people while gardening. And at the same time, they get all the health benefits mentioned above.

A great place to investigate locally is **Naples Botanical Garden**. For more

information, contact Britt Patterson-Weber at (239) 325-1356. If you live near a school—or **Grace Place for Children and Families**, **Guadalupe Center** or **Youth Haven**—inquire about helping out with their gardens, too. **Cornerstone Church** also offers this opportunity. Call Jan Etzel, the church's garden coordinator, at (239) 269-7341 or jmetzel97@hotmail.com. **Golden Gate Community Center**, which has worked in partnership with the Blue Zones project, allows people to purchase low-cost community garden plots. To learn more about this program, contact Pietro Ricci, program leader, at (239) 252-4188 or pietro.ricci@colliercountyfl.gov.

If you or your homeowners' association wants to start its own garden, there are resources for that, too. **Collier Greens** will help schools and community groups start a garden. They operate out of Naples Botanical Garden, naplesgarden.org, and offer guidance and some equipment. Individuals interested in getting started can get guidance from the **University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension** starting at sfl.ifas.ufl.edu. **Echo Farms** in Fort Myers, echonet.org, also has a community garden assistance program.

Now go get your hands dirty! **NH**