

AN ODE TO THE TROWEL

DIGGING FOR WELLNESS IN RETIREMENT

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In the twilight of our working lives, as the hustle and bustle recede, many of us seek not an empty void of leisure but a fulfilling second act. We search for a purpose that nourishes the soul, strengthens the body and grounds us in the present. As we turn our attention from balance sheets and boardrooms, perhaps the most profound of these pursuits can be found right outside our doors, in the humble garden. Gardening, far from being a mere hobby, is a powerful therapeutic tool, an unsung hero in the Zimbabwean retiree's quest for health and happiness.

In Zimbabwe, a nation deeply connected to the earth through agriculture, the act of tilling the soil is imbued with a spiritual significance that transcends the mundane. It is a practice that our ancestors perfected, not just for sustenance but for connection. This is not just about hard work; it is about a reciprocal relationship, a communion with nature that rewards us not only with a harvest but with peace of mind.

The Therapeutic Garden: Beyond Just Weeding

The therapeutic value of gardening is well-documented globally, yet in our local context, we often take it for granted. It is a form of horticultural therapy that addresses physical, emotional and cognitive well-being. Think of the garden as a living, breathing gymnasium and a psychiatrist's couch rolled into one.

The Body: The Gardener's Workout

The physical benefits are undeniable. Bending, lifting, digging and pruning are all low-impact exercises that improve flexibility, strength and endurance. It is a workout regimen that does not feel like one. As one pensioner quipped, "Why pay

for a gym membership when you can get a better workout and a basket of fresh tomatoes for free?" This gentle yet consistent activity helps manage weight, lower blood pressure and improve cardiovascular health. It is the kind of exercise that makes you forget you are exercising.

For those of us grappling with conditions like arthritis, the repetitive, rhythmic movements can be surprisingly soothing. It is a dance with the earth, where every step and every movement has a purpose, a quiet conversation between you and the soil.

The Mind: A Sanctuary of Serenity

The mental health benefits of gardening are perhaps even more profound. The simple act of plunging your hands into the soil, feeling the texture of the earth, is a sensory experience that calms the nervous system. The sound of buzzing bees, the sight of a vibrant bougainvillea, and the smell of damp earth after a rain shower all contribute to a state of mindfulness.

Imagine a man named Sekuru James, who recently retired from a stressful corporate job. The silence of his new life is deafening, filled with anxieties about his identity and purpose. One day, he decides to clear a small patch of land behind his house. He starts with a single seed. As he tends to this seed, he witnesses the miracle of life first-hand. The tiny sprout becomes a plant, which bears a single fruit. Sekuru James realizes that his purpose was not tied to his title but to his ability to nurture and create. He discovers a new rhythm, a new sense of purpose, one that is not measured in quarterly reports but in the daily progress of his growing garden. His garden becomes his therapist, a place of quiet reflection where he can work

through his thoughts and anxieties without a single word being spoken. In a world saturated with digital noise and constant stimulation, the garden offers a retreat, a space where we can disconnect to reconnect. It is a parable for life: just as we must pull weeds to allow the flowers to flourish, we must also clear our minds of worries to allow peace to take root.

The Social Garden: Cultivating Community

Gardening is not a solitary pursuit; It is a bridge to community. The simple act of sharing a surplus of mangoes, a bunch of chillies, or a handful of fresh herbs with a neighbour can spark a conversation and forge a connection. Community gardens, in particular, serve as vibrant hubs where pensioners can share knowledge, stories and laughter. These spaces combat the isolation that can often accompany retirement.

Consider the story of Mbuya Betty, who joined a local community garden project. She did not just grow vegetables; she grew friendships. She shared her secrets for growing the sweetest maize, and in turn, learned how to make the best sun-dried tomatoes from a neighbour. Their shared passion for the earth became the foundation for a lasting friendship.

A garden is a global phenomenon. From the allotment gardens of the United Kingdom to the terraced fields of Asia, and the homestead plots of rural Zimbabwe, the act of cultivating the earth is a universal language. It speaks of patience, perseverance and the timeless truth that from small beginnings, great things can grow.

The Legacy of a Good Garden

What makes a garden "good"? It is not about perfect rows or flawless produce. A good garden is one that is alive, one that tells a story. It is a living legacy, a testament to the gardener's care, wisdom and patience.

Think of a garden as a metaphor for a well-lived life.

It requires preparation of the soil (your foundation), planting seeds (your efforts and dreams), consistent watering and weeding (your daily dedication), and patience to wait for the harvest (your achievements). A good garden is not just a place; it is a feeling—a sense of pride, accomplishment and connection to something greater than oneself.

In Zimbabwe, a good garden is a symbol of self-reliance and resilience. It is a source of fresh, healthy food that complements our pensions, a quiet act of protest against dependence. It is a space where we can pass on invaluable knowledge to our grandchildren, teaching them about the cycles of life, the importance of hard work and the simple magic of watching something grow. As the great philosopher Voltaire might have said, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin" - "We must cultivate our garden." He was not just talking about a plot of land; he was talking about cultivating our minds, our relationships, and our lives.

The Way Forward: Digging In

For the Zimbabwean pensioner, the way forward is clear and straightforward. The answer is not in a new investment strategy or a complicated lifestyle change. It is in the soil.

Pension funds should advocate for and support horticultural therapy initiatives. We can start by creating small community gardens in urban areas, providing pensioners with space, tools and shared expertise. Workshops on sustainable gardening practices, composting and water conservation can be a part of this program.

Let us stop seeing retirement as a finish line and start viewing it as a new beginning, a chance to cultivate a new purpose. As we hang up our corporate attire and put on our gardening gloves, we find that the richest dividends are not paid in money but in a bountiful harvest of well-being. So, I challenge you with this thought-provoking question: What are you waiting for? Your garden is calling.

It is time to pick up a trowel and start digging for a healthier, happier, and more fulfilling retirement. The seeds of change are just waiting for you to plant them.

A good garden is a clear way forward, a path paved with purpose and green shoots of hope. It is a place where we find not just food for the body but also food for the soul.



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