

*Facing the Coronavirus: The Power of Plants in Times of a Pandemic*



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As part of her Healing Gardens (LDEM 262) course offered by the Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management (LDEM), Talhouk asked us to assess the potential positive impact of plants and nature in the context of the imposed lockdown.

It was difficult for us to adjust to this new secluded lifestyle; stuck between four walls, for months, away from loved ones, and exposed to nothing but news about the domino effect all over the world. Indeed, many of us struggle with the intricacies of social distancing and self-isolation.

As the lockdown eased, many countries began allowing people to go hiking and walking in their green neighborhoods. Some started gardening. Taking on these activities to cope with social distancing and isolation is not a coincidence. The naturalist E. O. Wilson coined the term 'biophilia' to explain that we have an 'innate desire or tendency to commune with nature.'

Researchers have shown that ‘biophilia’ is present even during disasters where people resort to planting to restore a sense of control. In line with Wilson’s hypothesis, and as part of the course assignments, several groups worked on this topic addressing different aspects such as nature views from windows and digital nature. Our group wanted to find out if people gardened to cope with the lockdown to improve their wellbeing.

First, we reviewed the literature to understand the mental health effects of the pandemic. We then studied course lectures and assigned readings to revisit theories and articles on the therapeutic value of nature. Each group developed a set of questions addressing their own inquiries. We then consolidated the items into a Google Form, which we shared online with family and friends for ten days in April 2020. Of the ninety-eight respondents to the survey, 72% percent were city residents. Respondents’ ages ranged between 12 and 64, but the majority were between 18 and 24, and 67.3 % were women.

We found that almost all respondents (94%) believed that plants made their living places more relaxing. More than half of the respondents answered that because they were isolated, they started caring for plants on their balconies (31.6%), their gardens (22.4%), or inside their apartments (8.2%). The majority (75%) said that they would recommend gardening to family and friends.

This virus has affected everyone on several levels. It has made every single person a potential target of distress, anxiety, fear, and depression. The positive aspect in this situation is that something as simple, accessible, affordable, and natural as plants can help reduce this negativity from our lives. Having a garden, surrounding ourselves by plants in the apartment, or on the balcony, can trigger feelings of tranquility, and mentally reconnecting us to nature. Our instinctive need for NATURE appears in times of distress, she continues to appease us.

*This assignment is an example of how the department of landscape design and ecosystem management (LDEM) integrates issues such as COVID-19 into its teaching. Our vision is to graduate “socially responsible designers and scientists who are responsive to place, culture, and*

*to the natural and ecological needs of the region.” As much as COVID-19 presents challenges to society, the students of LDEM 262 were able to see and identify meaningful opportunities.*

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