

## CULTIVATING HAPPINESS

I recently came across a quote by the great mathematician and philosopher, Bertrand Russell: "I've made an odd discovery. Every time I talk to a savant I feel sure that happiness is no longer a possibility. Yet when I talk to my gardener, I'm convinced of the opposite". Perhaps Russell was not aware that there has long been an association between gardening and happiness, as according to an old Chinese proverb "He who plants a garden, plants happiness".

Below: *Triumphal Arch, The Laskett, inscribed 'Conditor Horti Felicitatis Avctor' the Latin aphorism that means 'They who plant a garden, plant happiness'*



Many people have tried to understand what makes human beings happy. This is too complex a subject to go into here, but if we disregard the need to love and be loved for the moment, in general, physical activity tends to increase our sense of well being, as does learning a new skill well, particularly if it is attached to a sense of purpose. Tending a garden brings together both of these activities and can create a tremendous sense of self-esteem and gratification. We may only be custodians of a small piece of earth for a relatively short period of time, but it is a place where, if we choose, we can express ourselves without influence from anyone else (except possibly our loved ones). The only major controlling influence to our endeavours in the garden is Mother Nature. She has the effect of making us lose our self-importance and there is a feeling of involvement, either consciously or unconsciously, in something greater than ourselves. This may sound rather pretentious when all we may be planning to do is a spot of weeding, but cares melt away when you

kneel in the garden and the very process of kneeling is a humbling experience in itself. Down on all fours it is possible to enter another world, a microcosm of plant and animal life that looks very different from 5ft. or 6ft. up. Down here the plant leaves are covered in tiny hairs or other attributes not noticed from above, and the apparently inert soil is alive with a multitude of mobile mini-fauna, often observed by a beady-eyed, red-breasted companion. This is where I go when I feel anxious or sad, a place where I can collect my thoughts and put things into perspective, a place to be of the moment.

Gardens can also be a thing of beauty and wonder which, in themselves, can lift the spirits. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that gardens (rather than the act of gardening) can also provide a sense of well being. Gardens created in run down inner city areas can reduce the incidence of littering and vandalism in the vicinity. Research has also shown that people recover quicker from illness and operations if they have access to, or simply overlook, a garden when compared with those who do not. Perhaps, if we want to cure the ills of modern society one of the things we should be thinking about doing, is encouraging more people to plant a garden.

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