

10 Steps to Learning to Garden Meditate



Gardening was never my forte. Honestly, I proudly wore the label of a “brown thumb” for most of my life. I’d often cringe at the thought of tending to plants, certain I’d unintentionally send them to an early demise. Little did I know that my journey from reluctant gardener to someone who finds solace in the garden would be a transformative experience. It’s the mindfulness/ meditation aspect that does that for me. Here are the ten steps that it took to get there.

1. Starting Small

My first foray into gardening was timid. I began with a single-potted plant—a resilient succulent known for its ability to withstand my neglect. It required minimal care, allowing me to build confidence slowly. It wasn’t the first

one I'd ever bought. I had killed others before. But I was ready, albeit with baby steps.

2. Learning Through Mistakes

The beginning was marked by countless failures. Overwatering, underwatering, and choosing the wrong plants were all part of the learning curve. But with each mishap, I began to observe the subtleties of my plants' needs, fostering a sense of mindfulness in the process. I honestly never thought that I'd get there. My sister always tells me "Just ask the plant what it wants." I always thought she was nuts. But she's not. You observe and you attend and you are mindful and then it starts to all click.

3. Patience and Presence

Gardening helped teach me the art of patience and presence. Instead of rushing through tasks, I started to slow down, observing the nuances of my plants. And when I failed to do that, they died. This repeatedly reminded me of the importance of being fully engaged in the moment. This is really what mindfulness is all about.

4. The Healing Power of Nature

Amidst the frustrations and mishaps, I found solace in nature's healing embrace. The garden became my refuge, a place where I could escape the chaos of daily life and immerse myself in the serenity of the natural world. I am an urban woman. However, I love the fact that San Francisco offers so many opportunities to immerse yourself in nature within the city itself. You don't even have to have your garden. You can enjoy any of the small and large gardens throughout the city as spots for meditation.

5. Nurturing Growth, Both Plant and Self

As my gardening skills improved, I noticed a parallel growth within myself. Tending to plants became a metaphor for self-care and nurturing personal growth. I found that the more I nurtured my garden, the more I nurtured my well-being. The more I nurtured myself, the easier it was to remember to nurture the plants. It helps to feel more tied into nature.

6. Accepting Imperfection

Gardening taught me to embrace imperfection. Not every plant thrived, and not every leaf remained unblemished. Just as I accepted my plants' flaws, I learned to accept my imperfections with greater compassion. This is something I've worked in throughout my life, particularly through therapy. There are many ways of approaching it. The point is that gardening teaches us things like this in a somatic, experiential way that differs from just thinking about it.

7. Mindful Observations

In the garden, I developed the practice of mindful observation. I'd spend moments simply gazing at the play of sunlight on leaves, the dance of pollinators, or the delicate unfurling of a bud. These contemplative moments allowed me to connect with the beauty of the present. They reminded me that everything that's happening in my head is related to the past or the future. What's happening right now in front of me is what's real. The rest is usually just noise. By teaching myself to focus on just one thing in a garden, I learned mindfulness. And that leads to learning meditation.

8. Letting Go of Control

Gardening reminded me that life, like the garden, is filled with uncontrollable variables. I couldn't command the rain to fall or the sun to shine. I couldn't always shield my plants from pests or disease. Even when it seemed like I was doing everything right, plants would fail to thrive. It was hard. I wanted to fix it.

However, in relinquishing the illusion of control, I discovered a profound sense of freedom. It was a reminder that there is beauty in the natural ebb and flow of existence. Sometimes, the most vibrant blooms emerge from the unexpected and unplanned corners of life.

Gardening became a symbol of embracing impermanence. It offers an ongoing lesson in letting go that extends far beyond the garden's borders into my life. I still struggle with wanting to control everything but it reminds me again and again that it is okay that I cannot.

9. Celebration of Growth

Each tiny sprout, every new leaf, and the first bloom are all reasons for celebration. Witnessing the gradual transformation of my garden taught me to savor the journey and appreciate the beauty of growth. As with all of the other lessons, this was less about the garden than it was about myself. I exist in cycles and seasons but am also always growing. It's a powerful thing and it's nice to see it outside of yourself then to see how it relates to the inside of yourself.

10. Gardening as a Meditation Practice

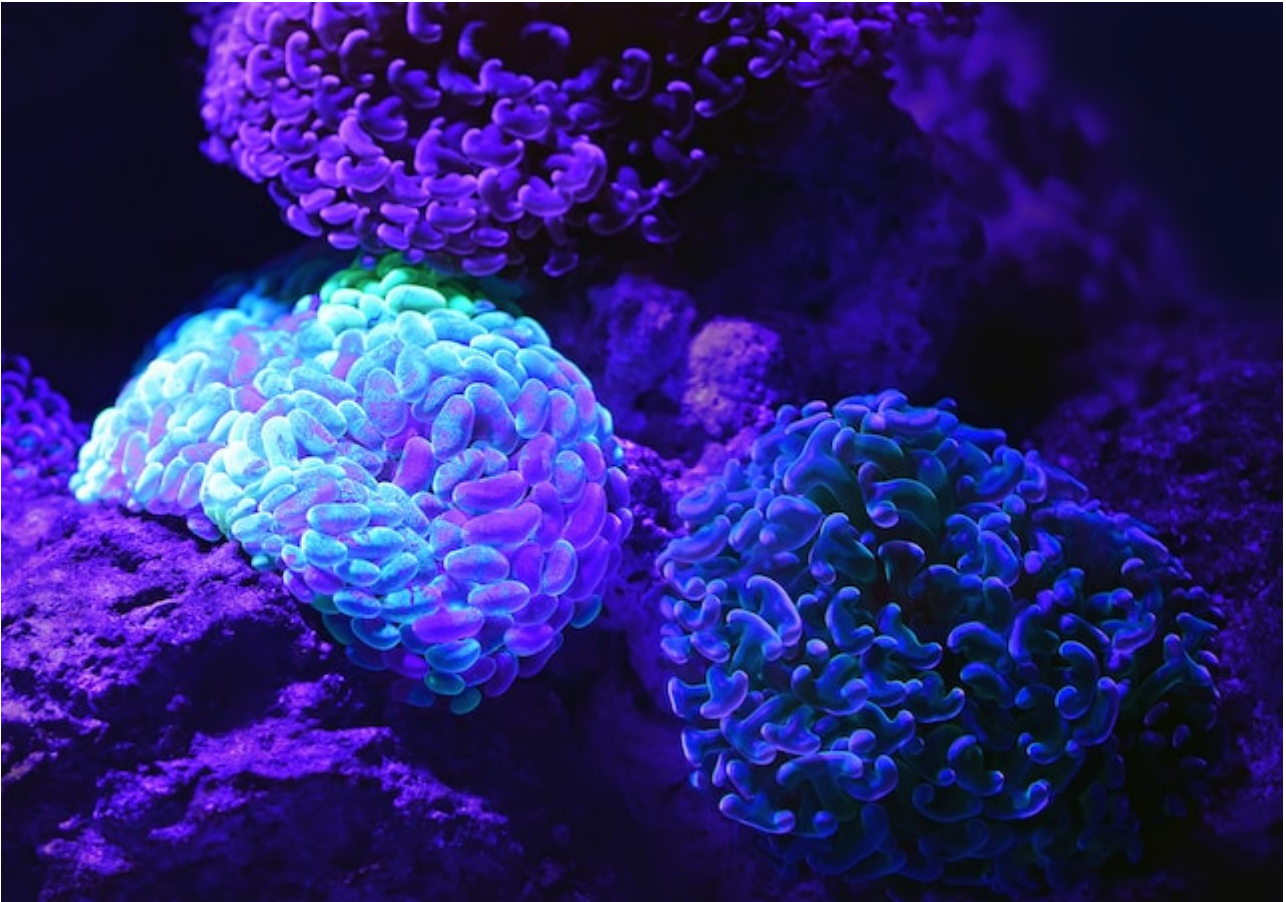
Surprisingly, I found that gardening was my form of meditation

or mindfulness. The act of tending to plants, gazing upon the deep colors of flowers, and immersing myself in nature's rhythms all became a profound mindfulness practice. I didn't know that this would happen although looking back it seems inevitable. By learning not to worry about "doing it right" and just being present in the act of doing it, I was able to allow things to grow. And in the process, I grew, too.

Read More:

- [The Gardener's Brain](#)
 - [Substack Gardening: Must-Read Newsletters if You Love Gardening](#)
 - [A Visit to Hollister House Garden](#)
-

The Gardener's Brain



As you stand amidst the lush, vibrant foliage of a garden, your busy mind settles into the soothing rhythm of the natural world. The rumination stops. You notice the gentle rustling of leaves, the cheerful chorus of birdsong, and the earthy aroma of freshly turned soil. It's in these still moments that you realize there's something profoundly transformative happening inside your mind. This is a phenomenon that we might refer to as "the gardener's brain."

What Is The Gardener's Brain?

"The gardener's brain" is more than just a pretty metaphor. It's actually related to the science of how gardening impacts the brain. [Research](#) has uncovered that activities as seemingly simple as digging, planting, and weeding trigger a cascade of neural responses within the brain.

When gardeners immerse themselves in these tasks, their bodies

release a surge of endorphins. These are the body's natural mood elevators, promoting feelings of happiness and well-being. This natural release of endorphins not only enhances mood. It also acts as a potent pain reliever, reducing the perception of discomfort and stress. The gardener's brain, it appears, [is itself a garden of sorts](#) – a garden of neurochemical delights.

Neurology and Gardening

Gardening engages various neurological aspects that contribute to its positive impact on mental well-being. Here are some key neurological aspects of gardening:

Endorphin Release

Gardening activities like digging, planting, and weeding stimulate the release of endorphins, which are natural chemicals produced by the brain that help reduce pain and induce feelings of pleasure and relaxation.

Dopamine Production

Engaging in gardening can lead to the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. This can result in a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when seeing plants thrive.

Stress Reduction

Gardening has been shown to lower cortisol levels, a stress hormone, leading to reduced feelings of anxiety and stress. This reduction in stress hormones can have a calming effect on the brain.

Improved Mood

Spending time in nature and tending to plants can elevate mood by increasing the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter linked to feelings of happiness and well-being.

Enhanced Cognitive Function

Gardening involves planning, problem-solving, and attention to detail, which can stimulate cognitive function and help maintain mental sharpness, especially in older adults.

Sensory Stimulation

Gardening engages multiple senses, including touch, smell, sight, and sometimes taste. This sensory stimulation activates different parts of the brain, providing a holistic cognitive experience.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Gardening often encourages mindfulness, promoting a state of focused attention on the present moment. This practice can have a positive impact on the brain's neural pathways associated with stress regulation and emotional control.

Neuroplasticity

Engaging in new gardening tasks and challenges can promote neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to adapt and rewire itself. This adaptability is crucial for learning and memory.

Social Connection

Gardening in a community or with others can activate areas of the brain associated with social bonding and cooperation, fostering a sense of belonging and connection.

Positive Associations

Over time, the brain forms positive associations with the act of gardening, making it a source of pleasure and relaxation, which can lead to long-term mental health benefits.

The Brain Benefits of Digging, Planting and Weeding

Let's take a bit of a closer look at how each of these three stages of gardening affect the gardener's brain in relation to the above.

The Brain Benefits of Digging

Digging, a fundamental gardening activity, offers numerous brain benefits. As the gardener plunges their hands into the soil and wields a spade, the brain's reward system springs into action, releasing dopamine—a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and motivation. This surge of dopamine not only fosters a sense of accomplishment but also reinforces the satisfaction of physically shaping the earth. Additionally, the rhythmic, repetitive nature of digging can induce a meditative state, reducing stress and anxiety while enhancing concentration. This combination of pleasurable stimulation, meditative engagement, and tangible outcomes makes digging a cognitive workout for the brain, improving mood and mental well-being.

The Brain Benefits of Planting

Planting seeds or young plants is a gardening endeavor that brings unique neurological advantages. When gardeners delicately position a seedling into the ground or gently nestle seeds into the soil, they engage fine motor skills and tactile senses, activating areas of the brain associated with touch and spatial awareness. The act of planting also instills a sense of hope and anticipation—a future harvest or a flourishing flowerbed—triggering the release of dopamine, which elevates mood and motivation. Furthermore, the nurturing aspect of planting fosters a deep emotional connection with the growing life, offering a source of ongoing satisfaction and a sense of responsibility. This emotional bond contributes

to a sense of purpose, enhancing overall mental well-being.

The Brain Benefits of Weeding

Weeding, often perceived as a mundane chore, conceals surprising neurological benefits. As gardeners meticulously remove unwanted plants or invasive weeds, they engage in an activity that demands focus and attention to detail. This heightened concentration can lead to a state of mindfulness, where the brain is fully immersed in the task at hand, relieving stress and promoting relaxation. Moreover, the act of weeding provides a tangible sense of progress and control over one's environment, which can boost self-esteem and reduce feelings of powerlessness. In essence, weeding transforms a seemingly routine task into a therapeutic exercise for the brain, offering mental clarity and emotional satisfaction amidst the garden's green tapestry.

Notice Your Changing Gardener's Brain

Since you started gardening, you might have noticed some amazing changes in your brain. You might feel happier and more relaxed when you're in your garden, thanks to all the fresh air and natural beauty around you. You might also find that you're better at focusing and solving problems now, probably because gardening makes you pay close attention to what you're doing. Plus, you've learned to be patient and persistent, just like your plants, which has made you more resilient in other parts of your life. Remember this each time that you head out to the garden. Celebrate all that this hobby does for you.

Read More:

- [The Best Plants for Mental Health Benefits](#)
- [Being a Beginner In the Garden](#)
- [13 Gardening Books on My To Be Read Shelf](#)