

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Gardening Makes a Difference and Brain Health Matters

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **April is National Garden Month, and we are examining the brain health benefits of getting our hands dirty.***

Spring is the season of new beginnings and even here on Florida's Suncoast we feel the pull to get outside and get our hands in the soil. As it turns out, gardening is good for us — mind, body and soul.

Research shows that gardening is a brain healthy habit that gets us outside in the sunshine and engaged in physical activity. It spurs our creativity, gives us purpose and helps us interact with nature — all crucial to protecting our brain health.

In fact, studies show that gardening:

- Promotes the production of vitamin D. This sunshine vitamin boosts our immunity and strengthens our bones while reducing the risk of cognitive decline and brain illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and dementia.
- Gets us moving. Raking, digging and mowing use every muscle group so gardening definitely counts as physical activity.
- Promotes sleep and helps us maintain a healthy weight.
- Protects memory. Exercise has been shown to improve cognitive function and a [Japanese study](#) found that engaging in horticulture and gardening may be an effective intervention for people with dementia.
- Boosts our mood. [Norwegian researchers](#) found that gardening therapy significantly improved depression and anxiety in study participants.
- Reduces stress. Gardening activities have been shown to reduce the levels of the stress hormone cortisol after a stressful event.
- Increases lifespan. [Harvard Health](#) points to a study from the Harvard School of Public Health that found women who lived in areas with the highest level of greenness experienced lower levels of depression, increased social engagement, higher levels of physical activity, and lower levels of pollution — all factors contributing to a lower rate of brain illness and death.

It doesn't matter if the garden is large or small, a raised bed, community garden, or window box, getting outside and getting dirty is good for our minds and our bodies.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Caring for a garden can also remind you to take care of yourself. The BHI recommends these tips for caring for yourself with gardening.

- Listen to your body. Physical activity is one of the benefits of gardening, but it's easy to overdo it. Use caution when toting bags of mulch and shoveling dirt.
- Stay hydrated. Drink lots of water and take frequent shade breaks.
- Protect yourself from injury. Wear gloves, long pants, closed-toe shoes, and other safety gear, especially if you're using sharp tools.
- Use toxin-free bug spray and sunscreen.
- Be cautious when using pesticides, weed killers, and fertilizers. Some chemicals can be dangerous and a risk factor for brain illness.
- Make gardening a family activity but keep a close eye on children. Sharp tools, chemicals, and outdoor heat all pose a threat.
- Get a tetanus booster every 10 years: the bacteria that causes tetanus lives in the soil.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

### **About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference**. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).