

How to nurture the green shoots of hope

His own experience of coping with the winter blues led **Monty Don** to the charity Thrive, which believes in the healing power of gardening

I confess that at this time of year my garden is a wreck washed up against the shores of the house with random vegetation clinging to it. None of this is my garden's fault. It is simply doing its winter thing. But at this time of year I struggle to see any good in it or much else besides. The reason for this glare is that I am a sufferer of SAD, which means that every winter I slide with banal predictability into a reductive funnel that is self-obsessed, irritable, unproductive and unhappy.

So far so predictable and so trivial. I get over it. Life goes on. But I deeply resent this. However, over the years I have learnt that, apart from occasional use of antidepressants and regular doses of light from lightboxes, nothing makes this better than getting outside and gardening. Some of this is just being out in the fresh air, especially on a crisp winter's day. But if it was just that then a brisk walk would do the trick.

There is something more going on, something intimately connected to the soil and to growing things. It is something to do with being directly plugged into nature's circuitry and even though hopelessly off-key with life in general, in being in tune with the weather, the seasons and the tiny details of one's own garden that make it the idiosyncratic place that it is.

I got connected to the charity Thrive through my own personal and regular experience of coping with winter blues and the healing effect that gardening has had for me, across the past 35 years or more. My own problems are minor and banal but I have seen, through Thrive, how powerful the force for good that gardening can be for people with serious mental and physical illnesses and how it can transform people's lives. Yet, although lost in admiration for the work of Thrive, I am not surprised at all. Why do you think that 11 million plus of us in Britain make an effort to garden regularly in all the seasons of the year? Some of it is to do with making

a beautiful garden and some of it to do with the love of plants, but I would suggest that it is mostly to do with the sense of wellbeing that it gives everyone, whether recognisably ill or not.

Anyone familiar with the British horticultural Establishment as manifested through societies, colleges or the media will know that it is wreathed in a kind of pseudo-scientific fog, measuring success in terms of plant rarity, size or a very dull received wisdom of what makes for good horticultural taste. Most of this is harmless enough and taken for granted as the "right" way to go about things in the garden. But I suspect that the real pleasures of gardening are much simpler and more mysterious than any of this. Gardens are as spiritual as modern man gets, especially in a kind of pantheistic relationship to nature. It feeds back to the gardener a wisdom that has almost nothing to do with the correct Latin names of plants or the proper way of growing them to show standard and much to do with an inarticulate, irrational, immeasurable sense of rightness and belonging. If that is not one of the fundamentals of good health then I do not know what is.

It is also fun — or should be if you are doing it right — and any keen gardener sees time outside as a treat rather than a chore. It really does not matter what it is that you are doing. There is no hierarchy in this. For instance, I love hand-weeding and mowing: the former for its gradual intimacy as I crawl through a flower bed, getting to know the garden as close up and personal as a rummaging mouse and the latter for the low-level order that it establishes. Nothing skilful or noble about either activity but both need concentration and attention and both are guaranteed to make me feel at peace with myself and the world. It's not a bad deal.

As well as physical health — far better than any gym — mental ease and stimulation I believe that there is



Gardening can reconnect us with the natural world, Monty Don says

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also a social health to be had through gardening.

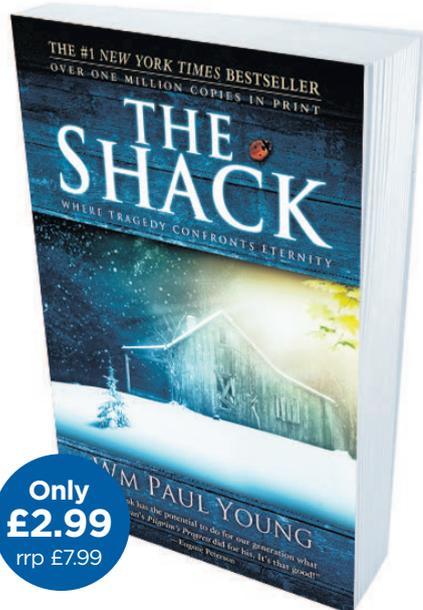
A few years ago I started a scheme with a group of local drug addicts, growing vegetables and raising sheep and pigs. The idea behind it — other than seeing no reason why they could not enjoy exactly the same aspects of growing things that I and so many others do — was to try to connect those that felt most adrift from society and whom society most wished to disown with a real sense of place. If you get to know your piece of ground it becomes personal and with that is a sense of responsibility and nurture. You give something of yourself to it and it gives back. Sounds a bit whacky but it works. Anyway, the group got involved and many made real progress — certainly much better than locking them up and much cheaper, too. It has not been easy but is still going and I would love to see more small groups like it all over the country.

Gardening is accepted as a gentle thing that people grow to love as they drift into middle age and beyond. The truth is much more powerful and dynamic than this. Gardening is the door through which we all can go to connect with a natural rhythm that can heal deep hurts. It is a means of modern society remembering and nurturing its atavistic roots, of growing some fresh seasonal food, of making an act of creation on a par with any art form and tapping into a life force that is richly empowering.

How wise of Thrive to tap into this power and to harness it for so much good. If you garden you will know what I am talking about. If you have ever had to cope with the stigma of mental ill-health you will know only too well. And if you can give anything at all to help the work that Thrive quietly continues to do then please do so.

Monty Don is the Daily Mail gardening columnist and an ambassador for Thrive. His fee for this article has been donated to the charity.

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