

The colorful blooms that adorn our homes and gardens can be partners in mind-body wellness. Here's how to harness their benefits.

When UK-based florist and Instagram darling Anna Potter first began working in a flower shop, she was struck by how many questions she received from patrons about how to manage tulips. Unlike most cut flowers, tulips continue growing when placed in water, which makes them rather unruly members of a fixed arrangement. Potter's customers wanted to know how to keep them from bending as they grew.

Though she shared tricks to perk up the droopy blooms, Potter felt uncomfortable doing so. At the time, she wasn't quite sure why. Now, looking back on the experience after over 14 years of running her own floral shop—Swallows & Damsons in Sheffield, England—Potter realizes it was because she felt a kinship with those disorderly, rebellious tulips.

They're "a beautiful reminder of just being true to yourself and not needing to conform to other people's expectations," says Potter, who developed a unique floral design style that embraces asymmetry and nature's wild side.

Potter's tulip tale is just one example of how interacting with flowers can open the door to insights that support personal growth. In her most recent book, *Flower Philosophy: Seasonal Projects to Inspire & Restore* (Quarto Publishing, 2023), the bestselling author explores how flower arranging can be a form of therapy, one that helps us to cultivate self-acceptance, weather the seasons of our lives, and listen to and learn from nature.

The book adds to a growing awareness that flowers offer us much more than just decorative beauty. Science is proving that engaging with flowers through our senses of sight, touch, and smell can significantly improve our physical and emotional well-being.

A showstopping attraction

Flowers are, by nature, attention-getters. Their primary purpose is plant reproduction. Plants that rely on pollinators like bees and butterflies evolved brightly colored petals and alluring scents to attract these critters. And let's face it: It's hard for humans to ignore these stunners as well.

"They have that power to stop us where we're at," says Potter, who notices the effect flowers instantly have on customers who walk into her shop. The display of blooms "just snaps them out of what they're doing in their busy day-to-day [lives] ... and they're transported somewhere else."

That shift of attention out of our mental to-do lists and into the present moment is the essence of mindfulness, a practice of becoming aware of our thoughts and surrounding environment. It's been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Feasting your eyes on flowers can lower physiological signs of stress like elevated blood pressure and cortisol (a stress hormone). It can also decrease negative emotions and feelings of anxiety. Remarkably, these beneficial effects hold true even when you look at a mere picture of a flower.

Every rose has its thorns

Potter compares floral arranging to painting. It's a visual experience of employing the colors and textures of flowers to create a work of self-expression.

But floral design is also tactile. It compels you to touch all the parts of a flower. Contemplating flowers at this detailed level is a stress-reliever for Potter when she's >

flower power

WORDS | Rachel B. Levin
PHOTOS | India Hobson



caught up in work deadlines. She might notice that a flower's leaves have been munched on by an insect or that a bloom is double-headed—idiosyncrasies that remind her not to get hung up on perfectionism.

“One of the greatest gifts I can ever be given by the imperfections of nature is the acceptance of myself,” she says.

Arranging flowers can provide soothing not just in our most vulnerable moments, but also among our most vulnerable populations. Studies show that floral arrangement activities can improve motor coordination among elderly individuals with dementia, ease pain and psychiatric symptoms in fibromyalgia patients, and boost brain function among those experiencing schizophrenia or traumatic brain injury.

If floral arranging isn't your cup of tea, why not try another hands-on floral activity? Planting flowers and pressing flowers are proven stressbusters, too.

Stop and smell the roses

The distinctive scent of flowers offers another pathway to their power. Potter finds that the aroma of a bud, a fresh-cut stem, or even its sap can awaken powerful memories and associations.

“I'll constantly be transported back to something from childhood ... where I would be creating or exploring or being curious in nature,” says Potter. Connecting to that more carefree part of herself feels like a salve amid the productivity-driven pressures of modern life.

Research supports the idea that flowers' scents can ease our frazzled nerves. Smelling the perfume of rose oil in the workplace can reduce job-related stress. The scent of lavender essential oil can help those with sleep issues get a better night's rest.

floral ARRANGING 101

Here are a few of Potter's tips for getting started:

- > **Use what's available:** Incorporate what's seasonally abundant—even weeds like dandelions.
- > **Experiment with color:** “Sometimes the most unlikely clashing colors on paper create something utterly magical and mysterious in a bouquet,” says Potter.
- > **Go for variety:** Mix plants with an array of bloom sizes, textures, and heights for balance and fullness.
- > **Think outside the vase:** “Any vessel that holds water can be used for flowers,” she says.

Inhaling floral essences can be medically beneficial, too. One study showed that aromatherapy with essential oils from gardenia flowers can reduce lung inflammation in individuals with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Ingesting flowers (edible ones only, of course!) is another form of floral therapy. Edible flowers have a host of nutritional, antioxidant, and antimicrobial properties. Tinctures of floral essences have been shown to ease the pain of labor during childbirth and reduce anxiety and binge eating among overweight individuals.

No matter how you choose to experience the healing power of flowers, a bouquet of benefits awaits. ▲

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Shop sustainably

Many of the cut flowers in the US are grown abroad. Shipping and refrigerating them generate carbon emissions that contribute to climate change. Choose seasonal, locally grown flowers to minimize this impact.

yes, CBD IS A FLOWER

Hemp-derived CBD oil comes from various parts of the hemp plant (*Cannabis sativa*), especially the unpollinated hemp flowers. Studies have shown that CBD may relieve pain, reduce anxiety, and help normalize high blood pressure, among other benefits.