

Lopez: Vegetable gardening and COVID-19

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

In the last two months many of us had to work from home or we just decided to self-quarantine due to the coronavirus. During this pandemic we faced a little bit of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Not knowing a lot about the virus and needing to feed families we have been surprised by the food shortage at stores. Even though shortages appear temporary, this uncertainty about food raises the importance of having a vegetable garden at home.

Having a vegetable garden at home gives us direct access to fresh fruits and vegetables. With a garden we tend to eat more vegetables and this means better health and much needed support for a good immune system.

Gardening at home or participating in a community garden helps us save money by allowing us to enjoy harvesting our own vegetables and keep most of our grocery budget for other items. We can grow vegetables year round in the Rio Grande Valley yet few people take advantage of our climate and rich soils.

Half of the Rio Grande Valley is considered to be a "food desert." This is an area where the availability of affordable, healthy, fresh food is limited. With the shutdown of businesses and the loss of pay, along with the closure of schools due to COVID-19, many people, are risking their health due to the lack of proper nutrition. School meals, all too often, were the only meals providing complete nutrition. The lack of nutritious meals puts our health at risk.

A vegetable garden is not only a good source of vitamins and minerals, the actual gardening helps you exercise, according to the publication "Gardening



Courtesy photo

Starr County's Better Living for Texans Agent Heidi Lopez is pictured with her daughter in her garden.

as Exercise," by Texas A&M University, Aggie Horticulture Department. In this article, experts say even the less strenuous exercise forms, like gardening, can help you burn off 300 calories just by weeding, trimming, and raking. Cleaning a garden can also help you tone your muscles and they recommend using manual equipment instead of power equipment, whenever you can, to boost your garden workout.

Being outdoors helps people relax and feel happy while isolated or self-quarantined. Many people garden for their well-being, gardening can help your emotional stability; pulling weeds can help you release stress and smelling herbs can lift spirits, not to mention that a successful garden gives you a great sense of achievement and money savings. Gardening can be especially fun

with family. Children get excited about growing food. Gardens support their capacity for wonder, admiration for growing plants and they develop a sense of environment and our planet.

Gardening at home or at community gardens can help save money at the grocery stores, improve physical fitness, uplift our spirits, and provide enjoyable time with family. Growing our own food leads to healthier meals and improved health for everyone. For all of these reasons, I encourage you to start your vegetable garden at home.

For more information about gardening classes or questions to help you start your garden, contact Starr County's Better Living for Texans Agent Heidi López, M.S. at heidi.lopez@ag.tamu.edu or call (956) 487-2306.