

Senior Australians and Benefits in Botanic Gardens: Growing plants, growing people

This study by researchers at the Centre for Tourism and Leisure Management (UniSA) involved an exploration into seniors' engagement with botanic gardens in a volunteer capacity (with seniors defined as individuals aged 50 years and over).

In total, 389 volunteers participated in the study. The majority (61%) volunteered an average of at least 1 ½ hours per week over the past 12 months. Many identified their main roles as garden guides (42%) or hands-on gardening (25%), with the three main motivations for volunteering being a love of gardens, the desire to contribute to society, and social networking purposes.

Gardens in seven states or territories in Australia were represented, with almost half (48%) of the volunteers surveyed aged 60-69 years, and 76% female. **Overall, volunteers were highly satisfied with their volunteering, and were very likely to recommend volunteering to others.** Of note, it was those individuals newest to their local community that recorded the highest overall satisfaction, suggesting the important role volunteering may play with integration into new communities.

The results suggested high place attachment between volunteers and the botanic gardens for which they volunteer. They also revealed volunteers in the study consider their overall health and well-being to be relatively good (5.7 out of 7, where 4 = neither poor nor excellent).

The setting of the botanic gardens appeared to play a key role in enabling the range of volunteering benefits (e.g., positive emotional state through enjoying the aesthetics of the garden, or intellectual/mental stimulation through learning about plants and the environment; Table 1).

Table 1 Volunteering benefits gained

Benefit	Average
Making a contribution to a good cause	4.4
Enjoying the aesthetics of plants and gardens	4.4
Learning about plants and the natural environment	4.3
Connecting with plants and the natural environment	4.3
Meeting people and socialising	4.2
Challenging myself to do new or different things	4.1
Improving my general health and well-being	3.9
Escaping the pressures of daily life and relaxing	3.7
Enhancing my professional abilities	3.4

*Measured on a scale where 1=very low and 5=very high.

The study suggests promoting the use of human contact with nature as an effective health promotion intervention, using volunteering in botanic gardens as one way to 'look outside' for solutions to some of the global health issues of today. This argument is maintained by reviewing **the three major benefit categories identified for volunteers of botanic gardens,**

- **intellectual/mental stimulation (and increased knowledge),**
- **social interaction and friendships (leading to a sense of belonging to a group), and**
- **positive emotional state (e.g. feeling of worth and achievement/satisfaction of contributing).**

Combined, these benefits contribute to volunteers' mental health and well-being as well as their social well-being (but the physical health benefits such as walking in gardens and gardening also cannot be overlooked). **One focus group participant claimed volunteering at a garden enabled them to 'retire to something, not retire from something'.** Many referred to personal benefits for their health and well-being as related to active and healthy ageing. It became apparent that volunteering at botanic gardens should be viewed as facilitating important benefits to the overall health and well-being of seniors in Australia.

For further information or to obtain a copy of the full report, please contact Dr Emily Moskwa on (08) 8302 3319 or email emily.moskwa@unisa.edu.au. **The researchers would like to sincerely thank the Friends of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide for their assistance with the study.**