

Gardening as escape from the world's troubles

By **Liz Douville**
For The (Bend) Bulletin

The onset of the 2020 COVID pandemic has seen more and more people turn to gardening as an escape. Gyms have closed or are on a limited capacity and the long-term working at home has brought gardening back in favor as a centering point for mental health as well as physical health.

There are many individual reasons to use gardening as a new tool for some at-home therapy. The National Garden Bureau credits author Janis Kief for compiling a list of "10 Reasons to Garden." I have added some of my own thoughts.

- Garden for safe, healthy food: Reports of food-borne illnesses and contamination regularly appear in the news. There are growing concerns over the use of pesticides, which has led to an increased interest in growing or at least purchasing organic produce.

There is also the issue of preservatives and additives in our food. As a test, or maybe boredom, I bought a loaf of a popular white bread to see how long it would keep in the refrigerator (not freezer) before it started getting unusable. After two months, I got tired of moving it around, and I put it in the freezer to use as French toast. At that point, it was still usable, only slightly dried out.

At present, I am most concerned with the fresh food supply as affected by the weather. An alarming report out of Texas regarding the fresh greens crop that was just about ready for harvest when the bad weather hit, declared it was a total loss. That would include many of the salad greens, plus fields of cilantro. Central Oregon probably isn't on the distribution route of Texas greens but it brings to mind that perhaps we should be more self-sufficient. Who knows when our fresh food chain may be disrupted?

- Garden for exercise: Gardening is as good an exercise as a trip to the gym, which may not even be open. Gardening activities provide both cardio and aerobic exercise. Studies show that an hour of moderate gardening can burn up to 300 calories for women, almost 400 calories for men. For older people, especially women, gardening can help reduce osteoporosis.

The weather will start changing soon, at least to the point that Eastern Oregon gardeners can be doing some prep work.

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Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

French fries are just one of the ways to make use of the humble but immensely versatile potato.

DON'T DISCOUNT THE HUMBLE SPUD

Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Some people look down their noses at the humble potato.

But when the chips are down, what other vegetable will always be there for you? Others stay rooted where they are, half-baked. Potatoes will leap out of the frying pan and into the fire for you, leaving their tots behind.

When you say spud, you've said it all. The common taters agree: The eyes have it. Potatoes are the root that made Idaho famous. How famous? You can watch all their videos on YouTube.

The time has come to elevate the potato to its rightful place in the American pantry, to honor its nobility and grace. Potatoes, this spud's for you.

OK, that's enough of that. But the point is pertinent. Though it is often overlooked, the hard-working potato is the most popular vegetable in the United States. And when prepared properly, they can be the absolute highlight of a meal.

I made five different kinds of potatoes, and I am here to tell you that each one was amazing. I can't even pick a favorite; they were simply all that good.

I started with the easiest and most familiar, french fries. It seemed like the American thing to do.

As a food writer, I am required by law to state that homemade fries are better than any you can get at a restaurant. But here's the thing: Homemade fries are better than any you can get at a restaurant.

They are better because you can do the same trick restaurants do to make them breathtakingly crisp on the outside and creamy and soft and lovely on the inside.

Simply fry the potatoes for a few minutes at a relatively low temperature, which cooks them all the way through. Then, when you are ready to serve them, cook them again for a shorter time at a higher temperature.

This second frying leaves the exterior nicely browned and crisp, while keeping the inside tender and sweet. It's french fry perfection.

Next, I made what I'm calling Potato Puffs (their real name, Cream Puff Potato Fritters, strikes me as a little excessive). If you try them, you may find yourself wanting to throw a party just so you can serve them.

Unfortunately, they are a little hard to

make, or at least time-consuming. I wouldn't recommend the recipe to beginners. So if you are not at least a moderately experienced cook, it might be time to become friends with someone who is, and then ask them to make Potato Puffs.

The dish is actually two recipes in one. The first is for mashed potatoes, which are straightforward enough. The second is for pâte à choux, the dough that makes pastries with a big air hole in the middle — eclairs, cream puffs, profiteroles and the like (more on that next week).

You mix the mashed potato into the pâte à choux dough, and then fry it in hot oil. The result are puffy little doughnut holes that taste a bit like mashed potatoes, and they are undeniably addictive. Apparently, they are a regular feature at some small restaurants in France. I want to go to those restaurants.

Just as impressive at a dinner party as the Potato Puffs was the next dish I made, Pommes Anna. This is one of those side dishes that I pull out when I want to show off without having to do too much work.

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Medical transportation a major driver in rural health

Ten trips to the moon and back. That's not a NASA shuttle travel log — that's how many miles our Non-Emergent Medical Transportation (NEMT) program clocked in a recent year.

Transportation is a crucial part of overall health and life in Eastern Oregon, where vast distances stretch between communities, and access to public transportation varies greatly depending on where you live. People call 911 for emergency medical transportation needs. But one of the most overlooked aspects of accessing nonemergency medical care relates to how people get to their various healthcare appointments — especially critical in our rural setting.

That's where NEMT comes in with solutions in partnership with caring community volunteers. At first glance, people usually have a list of questions. Who runs the program? NEMT is part of Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. GOBHI administers this ride service program on behalf of Eastern



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Oregon Coordinated Care Organization.

Who is eligible for NEMT rides?

NEMT program connects Oregon Health Plan members to physical, behavioral, and oral healthcare services. It serves members in 14 counties, including Baker County and Union County, in Eastern Oregon and the Columbia Gorge.

How does it work?

Oregon Health Plan members who are seeking a ride may call GOBHI during office hours, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., at 877-875-4657. For TTY users, 711 or 1-800-735-2900. Riders are asked to call to schedule at least two business days before their healthcare appointment, if possible. Those who don't know if they qualify for this

program can call 877-875-4657, and our staff will help with eligibility questions.

What does it cost?

There is no cost to Oregon Health Plan members, as NEMT is a covered benefit. NEMT partners with local transportation companies and volunteer drivers to provide free rides for members to and from scheduled medical appointments.

The impact of the volunteer drivers can be called "astronomical," and that's part of why we measure it in miles to the moon. Community members help others get to medical appointments. In 2019, GOBHI NEMT transported 5,571 individuals. They provided 121,283 trips for a total of 4.5 million miles — equaling roughly 10 trips to the moon and back.

We need your support. Volunteer drivers receive training, support, and reimbursement at the federal rate. Drivers come from many backgrounds, but share their love to drive, giving back to others, and eagerness to help their neighbors.

One example is Garry Cassidy, a GOBHI NEMT volunteer driver from Baker City, who shared these words about his experience:

"As a journal writer, I'm always looking for new material. When this began two years ago, I had no idea what was involved, who I would meet, nor the experiences we would have together.

"One thing I discovered was: The people we serve are in serious need of help. By the time we see them, they have gone through numerous challenges in medical treatment and are seeing specialists for, in many cases, difficult diagnoses.

"I'm acutely aware of how blessed my life has been: no serious injuries, still ambulatory and moderately cognitive. This job requires compassion, being a good listener — and trying to introduce a little humor now and then helps. Kindness goes a long way. Looking back at the 100 or so strangers I encountered, more than a few have become real friends.

"Last, I like the job because you know you will hear stories you could have never dreamed up yourself.

Plus, it gets you out of the house and on the road in beautiful country. You might even have the adventure of meeting a herd of black Angus cattle at 4:30 in the morning. They caused us a lot of trouble, but the passenger and I won't forget that morning."

NEMT appreciates Garry and all of our drivers. The need for volunteer drivers is continuous in many of our communities. If you are interested in becoming an NEMT driver, or have questions, please contact me at: 541-288-9303 or cross@gobhi.org. Please help us spread the word. Together, we help people get to the medical treatments they need. While we can measure the miles traveled as compared to lunar trips, we know the impact on individual lives is far beyond that in positive health outcomes and quality of life. We're honored to partner with drivers and everyone who contributes to this program.

Crystal Ross is the Non-Emergent Medical Transportation operations supervisor at Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc.