

# Can plant parables promote peace?

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Researchers say people relate to plants in parables and pictures. For instance, they say people who experienced tough environments and difficult life experiences may relate to the ruggedness of pine trees." Credit: Photo by Wan-Wei Yu

Stressed out? Spend some time with Mother Nature. Pick up any self-help manual and you'll likely find sage advice about the restorative effects of spending time in natural surroundings. Research shows that people who spend time in natural environments are more likely to realize long-term physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits. For urban dwellers with limited access to nature, horticultural activities like gardening may offer stress reduction benefits. But can participation in horticulture-based activities lead to enlightenment?

Researchers Wan-Wei Yu, Der-Lin Ling, and Yu-Sen Chang from the Department of Horticulture at National Taiwan University report on a study designed to understand beliefs regarding the spiritual benefits of

horticultural activities and to see if these beliefs were enhanced after participants read plant parables. The study was published in *HortTechnology*."

Horticultural activities may have the potential to promote spiritual health. Because therapeutic horticulture currently refers only to physical, psychological, and social benefits, the purpose of our study was to understand participants' beliefs about the spiritual benefits of horticultural activities and to discover if these beliefs were enhanced after reading plant parables", explained Chang. The research team combed classical Chinese literature and the Christian Bible for "plant parables", then surveyed students to determine whether reading the parables worked as triggers, or cues, for enhancing "metaphysical imagination".

The researchers surveyed university students from the National Taiwan University. Students were divided into two groups according to their horticultural background; the first group consisted of students from academic departments other than Horticulture, while the second group was made up of students enrolled in the Department of Horticulture. Students were given a questionnaire containing demographic questions, a pre-test of opinions on the spiritual benefits of horticultural activities, plant parables, and a post-test of opinions on the spiritual benefits of horticultural activities.

The four parables used in the study were selected because they contained metaphors that connected human experiences to raising plants or plant growth, for example: "Even the evergreen pines will wither when they are first transplanted to fertile soil. Likewise, when the environment changes, people will encounter immediate difficulties." (Jung, 1990).

The researchers found that regardless of the students' horticultural backgrounds, the participants did not agree when asked if horticultural

activities can promote personal spiritual health when there were no trigger cues. "This result demonstrates that people do not recognize the spiritual benefits of horticultural activities because most research regarding the benefits of plants does not mention a spiritual component", Chang noted.

After reading the plant parables, however, the number of students with horticultural experience who agreed that horticultural activities can promote spiritual health increased significantly. Interestingly, the change only occurred in the group of Horticulture students; students with no horticulture background did not report a change in perception. "This finding supports previous research that having more knowledge facilitates the understanding of the meaning that comes from aesthetic experiences", the researchers wrote.

Concluding the impact of their research, the team wrote; "This study demonstrates that plant parables can be used as a simple aesthetic education tool that can encourage readers to metaphysically transform horticultural knowledge. Thus, the effects of therapeutic horticulture can impact psychological and spiritual health."

So, urban dwellers, the next time you seek tranquility and spiritual connection, read some good plant parables—they could just grow on you.

**More information:** [horttech.ashspublications.org/ ...nt/abstract/20/3/568](https://horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/20/3/568)

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