

# Senior Citizens' Perceptions on Therapeutic Well-being and Their Influenced In-Home Gardening After Retirement: A Phenomenological Case Study of Kathmandu Metropolis City of Nepal

Gita Khadka

*Singhania University, Kathmandu, NEPAL*

Megh Raj Dangal

*Kathmandu University, Kathmandu, NEPAL*  
*Department of Development Studies*

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## *Abstract*

This paper examines the well-being of senior citizens, which is a matter of concern for society. Factors such as family structure, living arrangements, socio-economic status, education, health, and social structure (rural/urban) all play a role in the well-being of the elderly. There is a global effort to create an elderly-friendly society, and this study focuses on understanding the post-retirement well-being of elderly participants through their gardening activities. The study involved 12 participants, both men and women aged 60-75 years, who were retired from various organizations. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for thematic analysis. Most of the participants spent an average of two hours daily on gardening activities, influenced by factors such as family history, personal desires, advice from friends and relatives, and social media. After retirement, many individuals experience mental stress and seek new activities to fill their time, such as reading, writing, traveling, volunteering, gardening, playing cards, and spending time with grandchildren. However, many retirees engage in gardening without fully understanding the social, economic, and health benefits it can provide in their later years.

*Keywords:* senior citizens, therapeutic gardening, well-being, retirement, Nepal.

## 1. Introduction

Senior citizens are the country's mature, respected, and experienced population; their contributions towards family, society, and nation are acknowledged, so their well-being in later life is a concern for everyone. When discussing senior citizens, their welfare and conditions automatically come to our mind. While most people talk about well-being only regarding health, many studies have revealed that well-being is also related to social, economic, and cultural factors. Family structure, family size, living arrangements, socio-economic status, health, and education level in society, are crucial to assess their overall situation. According to WHO, health is a state of

complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 2024).

At present, all societies view elderly people and their well-being as complementary concepts. Working on senior citizens’ well-being is considered a social politics, and there is a vast global attempt to keep an elderly-friendly society. In the global scenario, national and international organizations are being focused on their well-being and approval of plans, policies, projects, and programs.

The World Health Organization’s active ageing framework urges policymakers, service providers, nonprofit organizations, and civil society to take action to meet the three “pillars” of participation, health, and security. The United Nations Principles for Older People—Independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment, and dignity serve as the policy underpinning for active aging (WHO, Active Ageing: A Policy Framework, 2002).

Their physical functioning as retirees of urban regions is a major priority for them immediately after retirement, given that they are aware of their increasing health problems due to ageing. Due to busy work lives and the lack of opportunities for interaction without a job, many elderly people are subject to psychological stress after retirement (Khadka & Dangal, 2022).

The elderly population requires assistance in many different ways due to their declining physical state (Shrestha, 2012). But we often hear our older people saying that they want to die peacefully before being dependent on the next generation, even for minor issues and requirements of daily life (Kandel, 2020).

Many studies have concluded that a physically active lifestyle reduces the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, dementia, several forms of cancer, and depression in people who are residing in city areas and are health conscious (Rappe, 2005). It is therefore important to find ways of keeping people active after they retire.

During aging or life after retirement, hobbies such as card games, gardening, reading, traveling, community work, leisure activities, etc., are increasingly popular with people to cope with old age and decrease loneliness. In the case of these activities, retired people who engage in gardening or are involved in a home garden do so out of pure curiosity without understanding the full range of social, economic, and health benefits for their later years (Khadka & Dangal, 2021).

As we know, our growing cities and urban areas are unfriendly to older adults; therefore, senior citizens are stuck at home and in their surroundings due to the lack of geriatric-friendly infrastructure and services available (Kandel, 2020). Over the past few years, people nearing retirement have increasingly consulted their family, friends, and relatives for ideas and suggestions for post-retirement engagements. Therefore, they prefer activities that bring them joy and pleasure and fulfill their desires without being too burdensome (Chalise, 2018).

People take priority to maintaining their physical health immediately after retirement because they are aware of the increasing problems related to ageing and a retired lifestyle (Khadka & Dangal, 2022). However, it is difficult to ensure the elderly remain physically active after retirement due to their living in urban settings.

The therapeutic garden environment has been documented since ancient times. According to the American Horticultural Therapy Association-AHTA, the first person to document the use of horticulture as therapy was Dr. Benjamin Rush who is also recognized as the “Father of American Psychiatry.” In the case of people with mental health issues, he found that gardening had a beneficial effect. This practice was used to heal war veterans in the 1940s and 1950s for the treatment of various types of diagnoses (AHTA, 2020). According to AHTA, Therapeutic gardening is the process through which participants enhance their well-being through active or passive involvement in plant and plant-related activities.

In 2004, Brascamp and Kidd found that the therapeutic value of gardening, satisfaction in seeing results, as well as sharing joy with other residents were associated with reasons to garden amongst elderly people at a retirement home. According to Thrive, “Therapeutic horticulture/gardening is the process by which individuals may develop well-being by using plants and horticulture. Active or passive involvement shall achieve this objective.” More generally, it focuses on improving the quality of life for individuals.

Gardens were introduced as therapeutic landscapes by Gatrell and Bingley (2004) in their studies of community gardens for older people in Northern England. Effects included positive physical, mental, and social well-being, where relaxation, inclusion, purpose, safety, and restoration were experienced by participants (Marsh & Williams, 2023).

Promoting light physical activities is a top priority for public health, especially when considering the self-care and overall health of older individuals (WHO, 2020). In countries like Nepal, where recreational spaces are limited in homes and public facilities such as parks are lacking, retired individuals have turned to gardening activities like roof-top gardening, kitchen gardening, terrace gardening, lawn maintenance, and indoor plants as a way to pass the time and engage with the community (Khadka & Dangal, 2022). This study aimed to explore the perceptions of senior citizens regarding the therapeutic benefits of home gardening after retirement.

## 2. Research methods

A qualitative phenomenological case study was conducted to investigate the lived experiences of senior citizens and their understanding and interpretation of the essence of home gardening during retirement.

### 2.1 *Study area*

As this is a phenomenological case study to explore the experiences/practices of senior citizens on home gardening for their well-being after retirement, the researcher collected the list of retirees from different sources like retirees’ welfare organizations of different professions. The participants formed a fairly homogeneous group with a good understanding and experience of the phenomenon in question. The study was based in Kathmandu metropolis city of Nepal, purposively selected for its representation as the most populated city in the country, where people are highly educated and conscious about their health and well-being in their retired life.

### 2.2 *Sampling*

Purposeful sampling was utilized. Twelve participants of different retired professionals from governmental, and semi-governmental organizations, NGOs, private companies, etc. were chosen as participants. Out of the 12, 4 nos. i.e., a significant percentage (33%) of female participants were interviewed. The age range of participants falls in the 60-to-75-year category and all twelve participants were living with family, possessing fairly similar physical and cognitive abilities.

### 2.3 *Research design and tools*

This study is part of a larger qualitative research study looking at the understanding of well-being resulting from home gardening from the therapeutic point of view. In the phenomenological case study, the participant described a situation after retirement where he or

she experienced a sense of well-being (Bauger & Bongaardt, 2016). The research design consisted of open-ended and in-depth interviews, as well as field observations.

In-depth interviews and field observations were conducted with participants, each one lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews were conducted from April to December 2021, with the average duration of an interview being one hour. Similarly, live observations were made of the plants that they have in their garden. With their consensus, notes, photos, videos, and voice recordings were taken while taking face-to-face interviews during the field observation.

#### *2.4 Field observations*

During the study period, garden visits/observations were conducted in the presence of participants and their families if possible. Collecting data and information as per the checklist prepared for field observation was equally important for this study. It provided an overview of participants' knowledge, skills, and experience in gardening. It also provided the participants' interest, dedication, and enthusiasm at a glance.

The checklist followed the five main points: (1) Types of gardens (i.e. kitchen / terrace / rooftop garden / lawn / indoor etc.), (b) The types of plants they grow around the year: seasonal vegetables, spices, fruits and flowers, and other plants for cultural aspects. (c) Types of fertilizers: compost / chemical fertilizers / vermicompost / green manure etc. (d) Monthly estimated expenses for seed, flower plants, fertilizers, fruit plants, etc. (e) Technical support they are taking from, (f) Time allocation for gardening.

#### *2.5 Data analysis and interpretation*

The study follows Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for thematic analysis by using Moustakas' phenomenological procedures. Data was collected using a themed interview. After completing data collection and field study, voice recordings through digitally recorded face-to-face interviews were transcribed, coded, and organized thematically.

#### *2.6. Ethical considerations*

First, before the interviews, the participants were informed of the study in writing and orally in comprehensible language to dispel any doubts as to the purpose and reasons for the study. In addition, the majority of senior citizens in Nepal live with their spouses and children's families. Addressing their lived experiences may include personal details of family life they may not like to share. Therefore, the participants were able to choose or reject any question that they did not feel comfortable answering. Finally, this study proceeds that all ethical principles must be based on respect for human beings and their experiences.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Perception of SCs' well-being at the family, society, and national levels*

The living arrangements and well-being of older adults are influenced by several factors, such as family size, family structure, gender, education, socio-economic status, place of residence (rural vs. urban), cultural norms, and societal traditions and health services and facilities provided by the state. In older generations, people had traditionally found shelter within the extended family system during social, economic, or psychological crises (Prakash, 1999).

The prevailing cultural tradition in Nepal is that older people are still cared for by their families, and the concept of living at old age homes is not widely accepted or considered feasible. The family network and society as a whole often criticize those whose parents are sent to stay in old age homes.

With increasing urbanization and modernization, families are becoming smaller and more nuclear, often lacking the ability to care for elderly members (Country Report, 2007). In recent decades, women have become a greater part of the workforce in cities and suburbs, which has led to changes in traditional family structure. Women have traditionally taken care of older people, but this role has been reduced in many places in Nepal.

In recent years, relatively affluent people in large cities have considered staying in special “ashrams” (hermitages) designed for elderly people, and this trend is developing in Nepal as well. Most participants, i.e. about 80%, said that the well-being status of older adults at the family level is not only satisfactory but deteriorating due to an increasing trend towards nuclear families and youth migration across borders.

One of the participants expressed:

*“Senior Citizens are ‘alone’ in their condition. Due to their modern lifestyles and busy schedules, they tend to be distant from their children.”*

It reveals that loneliness can greatly impact the well-being of elderly people as it is a cause of emotional distress and is linked to a variety of health problems in older individuals.

Likewise, another participant shared the well-being situation in the family, society, and national level:

*“It is a matter of social and economic status; it is not good for those with lower social and economic backgrounds. Those with a source of income naturally have a better well-being situation at the household, social, and national levels. Still, a large number of senior citizens are lonely, isolated, depressed, and without health care in their families.”*

### 3.2 Retirement plan and engagement endeavors

In the course of the in-depth interview, one of the following questions was asked to the participants regarding their post-retirement plan: “Did you have any plans or thoughts about gardening after retirement?”

Some participants claimed that they were expected to complete activities that they could not do while working a full-time job. Other people said they expected to spend time reading, writing articles, gardening, traveling, and performing voluntary social work.

One of the participants shared:

*“I was thinking of two things: the establishment of a cooperative farming system in my hometown, which would involve numerous small farmers. However, due to political instability and social unrest, this could not be achieved. Secondly, I was thinking about writing articles and novels as well as doing housework. After that, the scenario changed because I got short-term consultancy work in an INGO and continued it for about ten years. I continued other activities during that time, like writing books and articles and gardening in my modest kitchen”.*

The following questions were asked after the retirement plan: “What other activities are you doing besides gardening?”

Study participants included retired professionals with degrees ranging from Bachelor’s to PhD degrees. Among the 12 research participants, a few of them have continued

working as independent contractors or consultants while simultaneously making time for gardening. Others have chosen to engage in small-scale income-generating activities such as small businesses, real estate, agribusinesses, and finance-related organizations such as cooperatives, and they also engage in gardening during the morning and evening. Apart from gardening, they also do other activities such as volunteering for charity, reading, writing, and looking after their grandchildren. Gardening is usually one of the many activities they undertake each day.

### *3.3 Influencing factors to engage in home gardening*

The participants’ lives and experiences, influenced by their status at family and societal levels, contributed to their meanings and understanding of the definition of well-being. As far as the participants are concerned, their health and well-being deteriorate in later life, leading them to become socially, economically, and culturally inactive and inefficient. In this case, they have less movement outside the home and need more family, community, and national support. The senior citizens interviewed mentioned that different factors influenced them to engage in gardening activities, such as kitchens / rooftops / terrace gardening, lawns, and indoor plants.

Some participants said that they were influenced by their parents, as their families had an agricultural background; others were influenced by self-motivation and interest raised from social media, and a select few followed others’ advice and suggestions. Likewise, few said that they had started their horticulture activities by planting flowers and vegetable seedlings in a small kitchen or rooftop gardens and gradually improved their knowledge and skills over time.

A few participants explained their involvement in home gardening after retirement was to relieve the stress caused by consulting work and financial institutions.

About the engagement in home gardening, one of the participants explained his view:

*“I did some business for a while after I retired from the service, but when the situation became unfavorable, I left the business and became interested in rooftop gardening. Before retirement, it was not in my plans, but the pandemic inspired me to get involved.”*

One of the participants said she is motivated by her interest, therefore she expressed accordingly:

*“It’s the pleasure factor that drives people in this field, and it applies to me, too.”*

### *3.4 Facilities and services to senior citizens by government, and stakeholders*

The state assists in the form of a pension for retired government workers. The participants claim that it greatly contributes to the costs of their hobbies and interests, e.g., buying seeds, growing plants, and materials for gardens. They claim a pension for retired government workers and social security allowances for other older adults are necessary for social security and survival after retirement.

Most participants propose that by giving gardening experts a chance to visit their homes and facilitate the provision of needed materials and interactions with them to encourage additional support, home gardening can improve health and subjective well-being among older people:

*“Government services and facilities for home gardening are not up to date, so I usually take advice from private farms. Watching some private nurseries on YouTube has also taught me how to use technology.”*

Similarly, another participant expresses his perception optimistically:

*“This is art, science, and entertainment; after being involved, people will be satisfied with what they have to offer but won't want any government services or facilities.”*

By acknowledging their professional knowledge and facilitating the transfer of experience to the new generation, the Government of Nepal and the relevant stakeholders should promote projects and programs to improve the quality of life of the elderly and help them to participate in society.

### 3.5 Gardening as therapeutic wellbeing in urban environment

Additionally, equal attention was also directed to the social, economic, cultural, spiritual, and health benefits of home gardening. In keeping with the fact that participation in gardening is a great way to use spare time and reduce loneliness, tension, and feelings of depression, nearly all participants expressed positive views about it.

They pointed out that the care of plants promotes creative thinking and supports the value of hard work. One of the participants, who was the retiree of a semi-government organization shared that,

*“Gardening is a process of digging, seed sowing, fertilizing, watering, planting, transplanting, flowering and fruiting, etc., making you feel happier and relaxed.”*

There were many responses regarding the contribution that home gardening can make to people's lives, especially when there is a question about the engagement of senior citizens. They emphasized that it is possible to meet daily cooking needs, which can sometimes ease financial burdens, add nutritional value to meals by harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables, and have flowers regularly available for daily puja (worship) from their gardens.

Almost all the participants said that the Corona period was a highly vulnerable time. During the pandemic, they were not allowed to go out of their homes and had to keep a distance from their family members. Some of them said that they spent their time working in kitchen gardens, rooftop gardens, or learning about plants on YouTube and social media, in this difficult situation. During the COVID pandemic, some reported their experiences with plant-based preventive care using plants from their gardens, including ginger, turmeric, holy basil leaves, Giloy/Gudichi, Sichuan Pepper, Mugwort, Mint, Bay Leaves, asparagus, Vasaka, and guava leaves etc.

In addition, the participants shared that gardening creates joy, peace, pleasant greenery, and beauty in the home environment. Another participant pointed out that the relation of gardening with human nature is “focus” and “concentration”, expressing her view:

*“I'm physically active in gardening, which helps me focus and concentrate on other work as well.”*

The result of this study has shown that the link between plants and humans is a crucial part of the ageing process, as it promotes therapeutic well-being.

## 4. Discussions and conclusions

During field observation, the most common plants in the home gardens of all households were seasonal leafy vegetables, coriander, garlic, onion, chili, mint, cucumber, beans, bottle gourd, rosemary, bay leaves, lemon, papaya, guava, etc. Likewise, the Tulasi plant could be found in the lawns of most of the houses, and seasonal flowers were also planted for their daily

puja. When we asked about the in-average expenses for the garden, they said they were spending Rs. 1000 per month for the seeds of vegetables, seasonal flowers, and sometimes fruit plants. Similarly, they were taking technical support from private nurseries or friends when they needed support. Time allocation for gardening is mostly in the morning and evening, and they allocate an average of two hours a day.

From this study, it is clear that senior citizens can maintain their health, happiness, and activity in later life by following their desires, interests, and engagement. Engaging in gardening can greatly improve their quality of life by providing them with fresh, organic produce and flowers for daily puja. Gardening not only fulfills their daily needs for health, but also brings them joy, peace, and happiness. The study also highlights how home gardening creates a pleasant and familiar environment for retirees. The participants' experiences show that older adults who suffer from depression, anxiety, or loneliness can greatly benefit from plants and gardening activities, such as planting kitchen gardens, terrace gardens, and indoor plants. Families, societies, and the country need to support and encourage such endeavors. Local governments should strive to create geriatric-friendly communities that provide physical, familial, and social security for the older population. Participants in the study have also encouraged other older people to engage in health-enriching activities, with gardening being the best approach to maintaining a holistic retired life.

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