

CULTIVATING BALANCE BY EXPLORING PINOY GARDEN ENTHUSIASTS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This study addresses the research gap concerning the experiences of Filipino garden enthusiasts navigating gardening responsibilities alongside post-pandemic work and family demands. While global literature highlights the therapeutic and psychological benefits of gardening, little is known about how Filipino garden enthusiasts manage their hobby amid the pressures of the new normal. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected participants (four students and four professionals) to explore their lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: (1) balancing work and gardening commitments, (2) gardening as a path to stress relief, and (3) cultivating responsibility and personal growth through plant care. Participants reported time constraints, financial barriers, and limited gardening knowledge as primary challenges but also emphasized the emotional satisfaction and stress relief they gained from nurturing plants. The study recommends the development of accessible gardening tools, educational resources, and time-saving innovations tailored to the needs of busy gardeners. Additionally, community-based support systems and online platforms could be leveraged to sustain gardening engagement and ensure the well-being benefits of this hobby are preserved even under modern pressures.

Keywords: *gardening, mental health, phenomenology, post-pandemic, work-life balance*

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Filipinos, like people worldwide, turned to home gardening as a meaningful source of comfort and emotional

stability. Locally known as “plantitos” and “plantitas,” these gardening enthusiasts found that tending to plants offered more than just aesthetic value; it became a therapeutic escape that helped them cope

with the emotional strain caused by lockdowns, financial uncertainties, and social isolation (Sunga & Advincula, 2021; Delos Santos, Daiz, & Rosales, 2022; Coyoca, Del Rosario, Lazo, Calixtro, & Edaño, 2024). Through gardening, individuals reconnected with nature, found moments of peace, and experienced a sense of purpose despite the surrounding uncertainty.

The rise of gardening during the pandemic was not unique to the Philippines. In the United States, the average household spent approximately \$616 on lawn and garden activities in 2021, marking a significant increase from earlier years (Anderson, 2024). Similarly, the United Kingdom witnessed a dramatic surge in gardening-related sales, with Gardening Express reporting a 200% increase in plant sales in September 2020 compared to the same month in the previous year. Additionally, the Royal Horticultural Society noted a 533% increase in website visits from young adults aged 18 to 24 during the lockdown period, reflecting a rising interest in gardening among younger generations (Marsh, 2020).

In the Philippines, *plantitos* and plants mirrored

these global patterns by investing substantial amounts of money into purchasing plants, seeds, pots, and other gardening tools to support their newfound or deepened passion for gardening (Ong et al., 2022). For many, this hobby provided not only physical beauty for their homes but also emotional rewards, such as reduced stress, an enhanced mood, and a renewed sense of hope in a time marked by isolation and uncertainty. Gardening became a widespread practice that crossed age groups and social classes, making it one of the most visible lifestyle trends of the pandemic era.

However, as pandemic restrictions were lifted and society gradually returned to traditional routines, the initial wave of gardening enthusiasm began to decline. Many individuals, particularly younger people, found themselves with less time for plant care due to the resumption of in-person work, school, and other activities (Powell, 2022; Alayon, 2023). This shift led to the neglect of once-thriving gardens as balancing gardening with academic or professional responsibilities became increasingly complex.

A study by TREES (2022) revealed that 32% of Americans who had started collecting houseplants during the pandemic eventually gave up the hobby, with the primary reason being a lack of time.

These patterns are not isolated to Western countries; similar challenges are emerging in the Philippine context. As Filipino plantitos and plantitas resume their busy lifestyles, many struggle to keep up with the demands of plant care. Reports show that even among younger plant owners, a significant portion (69% of Gen Z respondents) admitted that at least one of their houseplants had died during the pandemic (Cerda, Guenat, Egerer, & Fischer, 2022). This highlights broader challenges in maintaining gardening practices once everyday routines and responsibilities resume, raising questions about the sustainability of gardening habits established during the pandemic.

Despite the apparent importance of this issue, a notable scarcity of local literature remains that specifically examines the lived experiences of Filipino garden enthusiasts in the post-pandemic period.

While international reports offer valuable general insights, little is known about how Filipino plant lovers currently manage—or struggle to manage—their gardening routines amid competing demands (Sunga & Advincula, 2021). This research gap makes it essential to explore their stories and understand the barriers they face today.

Addressing this research gap is crucial not only for enriching the academic understanding of post-pandemic lifestyle changes but also for providing practical insights into these changes. By examining the personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of Filipino plantitos and plantitas, this study hopes to uncover meaningful data that can inform both scholars and product developers. Such knowledge can help identify what resources or innovations might best support gardeners as they balance their hobbies with the demands of the “new normal.”

The significance of this study extends beyond academic value. The findings have the potential to spark the creation of new gardening products, services, or strategies that address the specific problems

identified by participants, particularly those related to time management and plant care under busy schedules. By offering innovative solutions tailored to these needs, this research can help sustain the positive mental health and well-being benefits that home gardening has brought to many Filipino households.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design appropriate for exploring busy gardeners' lived experiences and personal meanings (Smith et al., 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the primary research instrument, the researcher employed data collection and interpretive strategies to uncover rich, subjective insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Through reflexivity and interpersonal engagement, the researcher fostered trust and open dialogue, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Participants and Selection Technique

In selecting the study participants, the researchers

employed purposive sampling, selecting eight participants—four students and four professionals—following the guidelines of Rai and Thapa (2015) and Burnam (2022), which suggest that five to ten participants are sufficient for data saturation in qualitative research. Recruitment was done through online gardening communities, the researchers' university, social connections, and Cagayan de Oro social media groups. The inclusion criteria required participants to identify as plant enthusiasts with limited gardening time and to represent diverse demographics and settings (urban, suburban, and rural). Those with ample time or no genuine interest were excluded. Participant names were replaced with codes to protect identity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The demographics of the research participants are detailed in Table 1. All participants in the study were urban gardeners residing within the city. As the researchers are Senior High School students, their parents did not permit them to travel outside the city for data collection due to safety concerns. Consequently, all data were gathered exclusively from urban-based participants.

Table 1. *Profile of the Participants of the Study*

Code Names	Age	Sex	Occupation
P1 (Rosie)	16	Female	Student
P2 (Tulia)	16	Female	Student
P3 (Sunny)	17	Male	Student
P4 (Basilio)	18	Male	Student
P5 (Orchidante)	55	Female	Professional
P6 (Lavindar)	57	Female	Professional
P7 (Fernie)	40	Male	Professional
P8 (Eggyplan)	41	Female	Professional

Data Collection

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to gather detailed insights into participants' lived experiences with gardening, aligning well with the exploration of personal perceptions and challenges (Ruslin et al., 2022). This flexible method allowed researchers to probe deeper into emerging themes while giving participants the freedom to share detailed stories. To enhance trustworthiness, the interview protocol was validated by three field experts who assessed the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the questions with research objectives, ensuring validity and reliability (Morse, 2015). Based on expert feedback, necessary adjustments were made to refine the instrument. Data collection was designed to be participant-convenient, offering in-person sessions at participants' homes or the university (USTP-CDO) or

virtual interviews via Google Meet, ensuring inclusivity (Sullivan, 2018). Ethical practices were upheld through the use of informed consent, confidentiality, and culturally sensitive, neutral language in English, Tagalog, or Cebuano (Nnebue, 2010; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Data Analysis

For the qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis was employed following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). This method enabled a systematic examination of patterns and themes that emerged from interview transcripts and gardening journals. The analysis began with data familiarization, followed by the generation of initial codes, the identification of themes, the review and refinement of those themes, the definition and naming of them, and finally, the reporting of the results.

To generate the codes,

the researchers adopted a conventional content analysis approach, as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). In this approach, codes were derived inductively from the raw data rather than being guided by an existing theoretical framework. During the coding phase, the researchers identified meaningful segments in the participants' narratives and assigned representative codes to them. Related or similar codes were then grouped to form categories, and categories with conceptual links were clustered into overarching themes. Each researcher initially conducted coding independently. A consensus-building discussion followed, during which commonalities were identified, and agreements were reached on the most appropriate coding that best reflected the dataset. Only after reaching an agreement did the researchers proceed to categorization and theme formation.

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted immediately after each interview, allowing participants to validate the interpretations of their responses (McKim, 2023). All transcriptions were securely stored and reviewed to

ensure accuracy and quality throughout the analysis process (Clark et al., 2017). This analytic process ensured that the findings remained grounded in the participants' authentic experiences.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the identity of the participants, a pseudonymization method was employed to anonymize the database records, ensuring the data remained secure and preventing unauthorized individuals from accessing the data or information (Creswell, JW & Poth, 2025). Structured ethical frameworks also aid researchers in applying and discerning ethical principles in their research endeavors and facilitating adherence to ethical standards throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In response to the study's research question, three themes emerged: Balancing Growth, Navigating Gardens and Work Commitments; Gardening for Wellness: A Path to Stress Relief; and Cultivating Responsibility: Nurturing Plants and Purpose.

Theme 1. Balancing Growth: Navigating Gardens and Work Commitments

Balancing Growth: Navigating Gardens and Work Commitments emerged as a significant theme, capturing the challenge participants face in maintaining their gardens alongside busy post-pandemic work and family demands. This theme reflects what Borges et al. (2020) and Thompson (2021) describe as the erosion of leisure time as routines return to their pre-pandemic intensity, making it harder to sustain once-cherished hobbies, such as gardening. The data analysis for this theme is detailed in Table 2, presenting key narratives, codes, and categories.

Rosie expressed this tension, sharing, *"My work routine is never-ending, and I feel guilty saying this, but my plants die,"* highlighting the emotional strain of juggling competing priorities. Femme added, *"Aside from being a working mother with many responsibilities in the house, like taking care of the children, I am also handling the lab and doing this everyday work. That is why sometimes, I tend to miss it out,"* underscoring the layered pressure of balancing work and family. These narratives align with research by Choudhury and Saravanan

(2024), who note that decision fatigue from heavy workloads can sap motivation for leisure, diminishing its intended benefits (Soga et al., 2017).

Beyond time constraints, financial and knowledge barriers surfaced as additional hurdles. Lavindar noted, *"My number one would be pots and soil, but they are expensive,"* reflecting the burden of rising material costs, as also observed by (Dodge, 2022). Basilio explained, *"I usually make them into fertilizers,"* revealing limited gardening knowledge, consistent with Thomsen, Buhler, and Kristoffersen (2016), who found that gardeners lacking formal education often rely on trial and error, leading to frustration.

The theme 'Balancing Growth: Navigating Gardens and Work Commitments' captures the lived reality of busy Filipino gardeners striving to maintain their gardens amid the competing demands of post-pandemic work and household duties. The return to pre-pandemic work intensity has eroded leisure time, making it challenging to sustain gardening as a regular hobby (Maury-Mora, Gomez-Villarino, & Varela-Martinez, 2022). Participants' narratives

mirror decision fareflectthat reduces moti,vwhichn for leisure (Vohs, et al., 2008). Furthermore, the layered pressure of managing work, family, and gardening resonates with Soga et al.'s (2017) findings on the reduced restorative benefits that occur when leisure becomes another task.

Moreover, material and knowledge-related barriers further complicate this balancing act. The rising costs of gardening essentials, such as pots and soil, echo Dodge's (2022) report on the economic burdens of urban gardening. Resorting to improvised solutions due to limited access to formal gardening knowledge—an issue consistent with Thomsen, Buhler, and Kristoffersen

(2016) —often results in frustration and discontinuity. In the Filipino context, where discharge (resourcefulness) often substitutes for technical know-how, these limitations suggest the need for culturally relevant, community-based gardening support. As Adevi and Martensson (2013) emphasize, sustaining gardening requires not only time and motivation but also structural support systems and access to education. These findings underline the importance of making gardening more accessible and adaptable to the complex routines of working Filipinos, positioning it not just as a therapeutic hobby but as a sustainable and supported lifestyle choice.

Table 2. *Narratives, Codes, and Categories that Make the First Theme*

Narratives	Codes	Category
P1. I focus on my work routine much more than planting. My work routine is never-ending, and my plants die.	Focused on Work Routines	Little to no Time for Gardening
P7. Aside from being a working mother with many responsibilities in the house, like taking care of the children, I'm also handling the lab and doing this everyday work. That's why sometimes, I tend to miss it out.	Family responsibilities	
P1. Sometimes, we have projects we work on during the afternoon, so sadly, I can't take care of my plants.	Academic responsibilities	Poor Back-ground in Modern Gardening
P4. So far, I have not encountered things like that. I didn't really delve into plant machinery since it's not well-known to me, at least.	No prior experience using technology	
P6. My number one would be pots and soil, but they are expensive.	Expensive soil and fertilizer	Financial Burdens

Theme 2. Gardening for Wellness: A Path to Stress Relief

Gardening for Wellness: A Path to Stress Relief emerged as the second key theme, highlighting the emotional and psychological benefits participants gain through gardening. This theme reflects the broad mental health benefits that gardening serves as both a therapeutic outlet and a deeply fulfilling hobby (Alayon, 2023). In this study, participants consistently described how gardening provided them with joy, calm, and emotional balance, aligning with prior research that shows gardening's role in enhancing well-being and creating a sense of peace. Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of the narratives, codes, and categories that illustrate the key elements of this theme.

Tulia shared, *"Yes, it is fulfilling, especially when my plants start to sprout,"* capturing the emotional satisfaction that comes from witnessing growth. This sentiment is echoed by Rudolph (2024), who explains that nurturing living things cultivates feelings of accomplishment and happiness. Lavindar added, *"We must give it time, even during busy times, because it relieves*

stress. It is like we forget our problems," reflecting the stress-reducing and mindfulness-inducing nature of gardening.

Basilio elaborated, *"It is a perfect escape in the morning and after class. I water my plants to clear my mind, and after a stressful time, my mind is relieved,"* emphasizing gardening's role as a mental refuge. This aligns with Adevi and Martensson (2012), who showed that sensory interaction with plants can regulate psychological stress and improve mood. Furthermore, Lavindar reflected, *"I was delighted, especially when the flowers bloom; my problems vanish,"* illustrating how small moments, like seeing a flower open, bring outsized emotional relief—a point also emphasized by Thomsen, Buhler, and Kristoffersen (2016), who highlight gardening's therapeutic micro-moments. These narratives from the participants show that gardening is more than just a physical activity; it fosters a deeper emotional connection with nature, reinforcing what Soga, Gaston, and Yamaura (2017) describe as nature's powerful restorative effects.

The findings of this study reveal that gardening functions as a vital

psychological coping strategy among busy Filipino individuals, particularly in the post-pandemic context where stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue are heightened. The act of gardening offers a culturally resonant form of personal respite (Estrada & Roxas, 2019). As observed in participants' narratives, moments of joy from sprouting plants or blooming flowers act as emotional anchors, echoing *ginhawa*—a Filipino concept of inner relief or well-being. This connection reinforces prior literature affirming gardening as a low-cost, accessible form of mental healthcare (Alayon, 2023; Thomsen et al., 2016). Gardening, therefore, serves as both a therapeutic outlet and a form of self-care rooted in the Filipino value of nurturing (*alaga*), suggesting its potential as a culturally integrated wellness strategy for managing daily stress and sustaining emotional balance.

Table 3. Narratives, Codes, and Categories of Theme 2

Narrative	Code	Category
P2. Yes, it is really fulfilling especially when my plants start to sprout.	Fulfilling	Source of Fulfillment
P6. I was delighted. Especially when the flowers bloom, my problems will vanish.	Happiness	
P6. We must give it time, even during busy times, because it relieves stress. It's like we forget our problems	Stress Reliever	Source of Tranquility and Relief
P4. It is a perfect escape in the morning and after class. I water my plants to clear my mind, and after a stressful time, my mind is relieved.	Peace of Mind	

Theme3.CultivatingResponsibility:
Nurturing Plants and Purpose

Cultivating Responsibility: Nurturing Plants and Purpose emerged as a central theme, highlighting the deep sense of commitment gardeners develop as they balance plant care with personal growth. This theme highlights how gardening not only benefits

the environment but also strengthens an individual's sense of responsibility and purpose, aligning with Schmutz et al. (2014) and Jennings et al. (2016), who emphasize the role of gardening in fostering human-nature connections and personal development. A detailed breakdown of the narratives, coding, and categories associated with this

theme is provided in Table 4.

Rosie explained, *"I usually study their needs, which helps me save time,"* demonstrating how continuous learning enables busy gardeners to manage their time more effectively. Similarly, they added, *"We have to learn about the plants we are growing and study their needs. It might help save you time, such as their watering schedules,"* illustrating the adaptive strategies developed to meet gardening demands efficiently. Sunny stressed the emotional bond to plants, stating, *"You are committed if you plant. Plants also have lives, and you cannot forget about them even when busy,"* reinforcing the idea that plant care fosters not just routine tasks but a moral responsibility. Orchidante echoed this resilience, sharing, *"We never considered surrendering because our land would be a waste if we did not plant anything,"* reflecting a determination to

persist despite time constraints.

These narratives align with Coyoca et al. (2024), who argue that engaging with nature promotes emotional wellness and a restorative sense of purpose. Moreover, the findings align with those of Sachs et al. (2022), who note that gardening fosters perseverance and self-regulation – skills essential for balancing responsibilities. The participants' reflections reveal that, even amid busy schedules, gardening provides personal fulfillment and nurtures a commitment to growth, both literal and metaphorical. This theme highlights the importance of incorporating nature-based activities into daily life to cultivate responsibility, resilience, and well-being, ultimately demonstrating how meaningful and purposeful engagement with plants can enrich one's life.

Table 4. Narratives, Codes, and Categories of Theme 3

Narrative	Code	Category
P1. I usually study their needs, which really helps me save time.	Learning Saves Time	New Discoveries
P1. We have to learn about the plants we are growing and study their needs. It might help save you time, such as their watering schedules.	New Learnings	
P3. You are committed if you plant. Plants also have lives, and you cannot forget about them even when busy.	Commitments in Plants	Gardening Engagement
P5. We never considered surrendering because our land would be a waste if we didn't plant anything.	Perseverance in Gardening	

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In answer to the research question, this study concludes that busy Filipino *plantitos* and *plantitas* perceive their gardening hobby in the new normal as both a source of stress relief and personal fulfillment, despite the challenges of limited time, financial constraints, and knowledge gaps. The three themes—balancing work and gardening, gardening as a path to stress relief, and cultivating responsibility—highlight how participants navigate competing demands while maintaining a meaningful connection to their plants. Ultimately, gardening remains a valued, restorative activity that provides emotional satisfaction and a sense of purpose, even as post-pandemic responsibilities intensify.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is recommended that accessible, time-saving gardening tools and mobile applications be developed to help garden enthusiasts efficiently manage plant care alongside work and home responsibilities, thereby enhancing their well-

being in the new normal. For future research, STEM students may explore innovations such as automated irrigation systems, innovative gardening technologies, or sustainable plant care solutions, building on the qualitative insights of this study to design products or prototypes that address real-life challenges. Additionally, given the study's small qualitative sample, conducting a larger-scale quantitative study is recommended to statistically examine the relationship between gardening engagement, stress relief, and personal growth. This follow-up research could measure correlations or predictive patterns using surveys or experiments, providing more generalizable insights. Quantitative analysis can also validate the three themes identified, offering evidence-based strategies for improving the gardening experience among busy individuals in broader populations.

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