THE REASONS ARE AS DIFFERENT AS THE PEOPLE

By LIEB McCABE

According to a recent survey of Midwesterners, gardening in any form whatsoever leads all other recreations with the somewhat staggering percentage of 97. This was 97 per cent greater than the figure for golf; 31 per cent more than fishing. To non-gardeners (obviously there are a few) this is little short of amazing. "What does anyone see in gardening?" they ask.

That's a fair question. In an attempt to find the answers to this, the gardeners in various fields were asked as to their reasons for gardening. Take novelist John Steinbeck, for example. He regularly putters around his city back yard in the East Seventies. "With me gardening is a sort of a nervous tic," Mr. Steinbeck said. He was quite clear, however, about the fact that he "loves" his garden; is particularly proud of a forty-foot oak. "But we're just like everybody else in New York. We plant lots of bulbs and things and then, just when they're about to come up, we take off for the country." Mr. Steinbeck paused thoughtfully. "This year we may stay in town and see what happens." (When last heard from Mr. Steinbeck was boarding a plane for Mexico City. — Ed.)

Business Men, Too

Successful business men who also garden successfully are legion. Bank presidents, woolen manufacturers, mining engineers—the president of the American Doughnut Corporation, Mr. Earl Morse by name. Among Mr. Morse's reasons for gardening are 1) "It's good fun," 2) "It's a challenge to exploit nature when she is generous and to outwit her in her unkind moods," and 3) "Gardens never grow old. They are always full of enthusiasm and curiosity even at a great age."

Gardeners who also happen to be politicians is another matter. (See Vicente.) There are more rare. Senator George D. Aiken (Vt.) is one. The ex-Governor, well known for his flower circles for his book "Pioneer with Wild Flowers," says he gardens because "in the observation of plant characteristics and habits, it is possible to get a better philosophy of all life." Then there is State Senator Thomas Desmond (R. N. Y.). In addition to his senatorial duties, he maintains a forty-five-acre arboretum and a relatively modest flower garden. Senator Desmond says he gardens because "it is a healthy change for the mind and to feel near to God and to enjoy the beauties of nature — and a resting place for my soul." The thrill of seeing life come up out of the ground, etc., but couldn't possibly come straight out and say anything that is "corny." The exception to the rule was elevator operator Jessie Hughe. "Why I just love to garden," he said frankly. "I get out of bed in the morning and then you see a plant come up." He smiled. "It's a wonderful thing."

Psychology of It

Not entirely satisfied with these motives for gardening, we asked a psychoanalyst on the staff of Roosevelt Hospital to shed some Adler-Jung light on the matter. (We probably wouldn't get what he would say.) "The old snowball theory is one basic reason why people garden," he began. He moved to the country and start gardening because everybody else is doing it. People also garden, he went on, "because it's free from interpersonal relationships, particularly clashes of will. In other words, the flowers aren't going to talk back. Then again, he continued, "people garden for esthetic reasons. Color, form and so on. This is not particularly psychiatric."

"The old mustard seed idea," he said, referring to the mysterious relationship between the man who sows a seed and the plant that comes up. "And take the fellow with a vegetable garden. When he's out working in it, it's a matter between him and his soul. For the moment he's independent not only of the man who sells vegetables but of his boss, too." He paused. "In fact, one could go on and on giving the reasons why people garden. Take me, for instance. My gardening, limited as it is, has its genesis in anti-gardening feelings."

Hoping against hope that my own reasons for gardening were normal, I went on to find out what actress Helen Hayes had to say on the subject. "I've spent nine-tenths of my life in a job—a profession," Miss Hayes began. "And what I've achieved is a matter of opinion. In fact, there are always two opinions," she added. "Well, one day I was in the garden showing a friend of mine a rose. It was Peace, and I said, 'Now that's a perfect rose.' And my friend, no Brooks Atkinson to tell me it isn't in the morning.'"