The good news in the latest research is that the brain retains plasticity across the entire life span. Dr. Richard Restak, suggests that the brain is a “work in progress that continues from birth till the day you die”. Brain health is closely related to heart health, the stronger the heart, the sharper the memory.

**Positive steps to help us get smarter and stay sharper:**

- **Think about thinking.** What kind of things do you forget and what do you remember? Can you rattle off your old phone number, but cannot remember someone’s new cell phone number?

- **Improve your recall.** Write down a series of random numbers starting with 5 digits. Without looking, repeat them aloud or in your mind, one per second. Work your way up to 9 digits. Do the same with letters, but spell them backward.

- **Use mental images.** To strengthen your visual memory, study the seating arrangement at church. Then close your eyes or look away. See if you can recreate it in your mind.

- **Make emotional connections.** One way to remember feelings is to look at an old photo of yourself. Write a mental dialogue with yourself.

- **Stay (or get) interested in art and music.** According to Dr. Restak, listening to music can sharpen your brain. Listening to classical music contributes to multilevel thinking. Seeing and studying fine art can improve memory and create new linkages within your brain. I always wanted to learn to paint…. What am I waiting for?

- **Creative pursuits help too.** Writing poetry, painting a portrait or composing on a musical instrument can strengthen the ability to find solutions to problems. Neurologist Alice Flaherty says, “creative thinking gets both sides of the brain working”.

- **Go beyond your comfort zone.** To stay sharp, we need to push ourselves and try new things we’re not necessarily good at or comfortable with. For example, read challenging books, take a class or course, or travel. Share your new knowledge with others.
It is March and soon we’ll begin working the soil in preparation for the spring planting season. Working the soil provides an opportune time to add amendments and make improvements to your soil.

In Missouri, many gardeners live in areas where soil conditions are not so great. With either clay, rocky or sandy soils, many of us gardeners are left dreaming of a fertile, easy to work soil that will grow anything. For those who do garden with great soil, a better soil is a work in progress. They are always soil testing, adding amendments, incorporating organic matter, and limiting the cultivation of the soil. Here are some tips for a road to a better garden soil:

• First and foremost, soil test every 2-3 years! Knowing what is in your soil, and what the possible problems are is a giant step toward a better soil. A soil test will give the pH, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and magnesium levels.

• Limit your roto-tilling. Tillers can do a good job of incorporating old plant residues or amendments, and creating a good seed bed for planting; but tillers can be greatly overused. For starters, tilling brings dormant weed seeds to the surface where they will germinate. Secondly, it can destroy soil and cause crusting of the soil surface. This will impede water infiltration, increase runoff, reduce germination rates of seedlings, and can lead to soil compaction. Continual tillage at the same depth will also create a hard pan beneath the tilled surface of the soil. This hard pan can become quite dense, reducing water and root movement downward through the soil, thus restricting plant growth.

• You should also be mindful of the soil conditions when you till. If the soil is too wet, then clods can form. These clods are very dense and hard to break down once they dry out. Plus, tilling wet soil can lead to compaction. To make sure the soil is dry enough to till, take a handful of soil in your hand and squeeze it to form a ball. Then apply slight pressure to the soil ball with your thumb and finger. If the ball does not crumble easily, then the soil is too wet to till and you should wait until it dries further.

• Spring provides a great time to add amendments to the soil. Organic amendments are a great way to improve your soil. Adding organic matter improves water infiltration, soil tilth, increases drainage in clay soils, supplies plant nutrients and improves the physical conditions of the soil. There are a number of amendments to add to the soil: peat moss, manure, humus, compost, grass clippings, leaves, etc.

• Sand should not be used as a soil amendment. Many people add it to a heavy clay soil, thinking it will improve drainage when it actually compounds drainage problems. Instead of creating pore space, adding sand to clay will fill in the pores and you will end up with soil that resembles concrete! Choose an organic amendment instead.

• During the growing season, take advantage of grass clippings, leaves, vegetable scraps, or any green or brown organic material that may come your way. Start your own compost pile that can be added to your garden soil at the end (or beginning) of the gardening year. Organic matter is the best thing you can add to make your soil a “Healthy Soil.”

• Plant a cover crop! Cover crops are plants that you sow in your garden when it is laying fallow. After the crop get about 6-10 inches high, it is incorporated into the soil or mowed to lay on top of the soil. For example, after removing cabbage and broccoli, instead of leaving the area empty, plant buckwheat. At the end of the year when the plants are pulled, plant a cool season cover crop such as winter wheat or winter rye. Cover crops cover the soil, prevent erosion, improves the soil tilth, aeration and structure, and much, much more.

Building up "good" soil is a process that takes many years to accomplish and adding organic amendments is a key step in improving your soil.
The increasing environmental awareness in the United States is wonderful. Due to this increased awareness, about ten to fifteen percent of the people are choosing to use the re-usable grocery bags. It is also good that food safety awareness is also increasing. When choosing to use the reusable cloth grocery bags, food safety has to be considered as well as the environment.

Two things are important when you use these bags: remember to take them to the store, and to wash the bags often. Cross-contamination of foods has the potential to cause food borne illness. Meats need to be bagged separately from fresh produce. If the bags are not washed between uses, bacteria from meat dripping could contaminate other foods the next time the bag is used. This is particularly important if the other foods are going to be eaten without further cooking. It is good to put the meat packages in a plastic bag before putting in the cloth bag, but this cuts down on the positive “green” benefit.

A recent joint food-safety research report published by the University of Arizona and Loma Linda University in California, reported that the cross-contamination risks from using reusable grocery bags could pose a serious risk to public health. Dangerous bacteria were detected in half the bags sampled at a high enough level to cause serious health problems. The study also showed that 97 percent of those interviewed never washed their reusable bags. Soap and water will kill 99% of the bacteria. Bleach is not necessary.

Food Marketing Institute
http://www.fmi.org/docs/foodsafety/grocery_bags_guidance.pdf

- Always use a clean grocery bag (reusable, plastic or paper) or tote.
- Use dedicated totes and bags only for groceries.
- Follow washing instructions provided on reusable bags.
- Wash bags and totes regularly—after each use.
- Wash by hand or machine with soap and water; bleach is not necessary.
- Store bags and totes in a clean, dry location.
- Keep raw products like meat and poultry away from ready-to-eat foods.

The need to wash the bags is not just from bacteria from meat juices. The bags are set on grocery store counters or carts, and possibly sat on the floor of the car, then taken home and sat on the kitchen counter. Just think of all the germs that the bags could have picked up along the way and spread to your kitchen. Remember to wash the kitchen surface, where the bags have been, before food comes in contact with that surface. Counter surface contamination also applies to plastic or paper bags.

The safety precautions that apply to all grocery bags apply to cloth bags. Bag meats separately from any other food products. Wrap each meat item in a separate plastic bag before adding to grocery bag. Bag hot foods together; bag frozen and cold foods together. Putting all the cold items together helps them to stay cold longer, and prevents hot foods from bringing the temperature down. Pack non-food items and cleaning supplies separately from food items. Fragile items should go on top.

When purchasing reusable grocery bags, read the label. The bags can be made from recycled plastic bottles, cotton, or mesh. Make sure they are labeled as washable. Lead was found in bags from some major supermarkets. The biggest concern is lead leaching into foods that come into direct contact with the bags. Make sure the bags are durable enough to hold heavier items, if you are going to be using them for canned goods or liquids.

http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/humannutrition/nutritionnews/Green_Clean.htm
- **Keep an open mind.** Do not jump to conclusions, and do not accept a simple explanation without considering the facts in front of you.

- **Stay active and eat healthy.** A recent Duke University study found that the healthy brain gets stronger with age. Regular exercise gets oxygen to the brain and encourages the creation of new brain cells. Strength training has been found to improve the brain’s ability to focus, process information, and make decisions. Don’t smoke, drink only one alcohol beverage a day, and eat a brain healthy diet with plenty of B vitamins and low fat foods.

Many of the elderly people I work with complain to me that they cannot remember people’s names. My own dear husband will ask me, “Now what is their name?” Sometimes the exchange of name takes less than five seconds and it is reasonable that we don’t remember their name. I pride myself in learning names, and I was interested in reading an article on recalling names. Here is what I have learned in remembering names:

1. **Repeat the first name.** “Nice to meet you, Ann” Then remember the name long enough to introduce Ann to another person at the event.
2. **Ask the last name again or confirm it.** “Tell me your last name again”. When people say their last name separately, they tend to speak more clearly.
3. **Ask a question or comment on the person’s name.** “Do you like to be called Ann or Annie, or are you a new member of the church?”

Teach your own name when introducing yourself. Say your first name twice. “Hello, I’m Mary. Mary….. Gosche. Pause between your first name and last name. Say something to help the person remember your name. Spell the last name.