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No place like gnome

LIFESTYLE
REPORTER

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THE humble garden gnome may be a way to add a splash of character and colour to a front yard, but the small cement statue can also increase the perception of safety within a neighbourhood.

A balcony, front porch or hedge that does not block views can do the same and suggests to those living on the same street that a homeowner is willing to socialise.

University of Western Australia research associate Dr Sarah Foster examined 61 new outer suburb neighbourhoods in Perth to test the theory that a mass of well-maintained houses and gardens in the suburbs created safe, walkable streetscapes.

She found the more personalised a home, which included features from

elaborate letterboxes to pot plants, the safer an area was perceived and the friendlier neighbours seemed.

"If you look at homes in new suburbs on the urban fringe, they tend to be quite similar but, where houses reflected residents' guardianship, even with things like garden gnomes, it made the houses appear less anonymous," she said.

"One of the main things to come from this is that there are several features that are quite important in determining what is believed safe. Where streets had all these features, like the low front wall or a hedge, there was a much lower chance of vandalism or graffiti."

A similar study by another University of Western Australia expert, Professor Lisa Wood, found the presence of too many commercial outlets

and big car parks can detract from the sense of community residents feel.

She found the more people felt a sense of community, the more likely they were to go outdoors. "People are more likely to walk in attractive neighbourhoods. However, negative visual cues deter residents from engaging in physical activity," she said.

"Good home maintenance appears to inhibit the incidence of graffiti and litter and contributes to the creation of safe, inviting streets for pedestrians."

Housing Industry Association SA executive director Robert Harding said the results were unsurprising.

He listed West Lakes as an example of a development that had successfully achieved safe, lifestyle living.