

Gardening for the Physically Challenged

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Most gardeners have some challenge; some buy too many seeds, some procrastinate in pulling weeds, and some purchase exotic plants that don't grow in our climate.

But physical challenges can make a gardener hang up the gardening gloves! If this sounds like you, don't do it! There are ways to make gardening easier.

If you can't get down to the soil, raised beds or planter boxes might be the answer. Beds that are 6- to 12-inches high might be sufficient for gardeners with back problems or difficulty kneeling; beds 2½ to 3-feet high (or elevated on legs) might be needed for those in wheelchairs. For easy reach, raised beds should be less than 4-feet wide (or 2-feet if you can approach the bed from only one side).

Container gardening is another tactic, especially for those with mobility problems. Containers can be sited close to the house (e.g., on the deck or patio) and placed within easy reach. Just about any vegetable or annual flower, and many perennials, can be grown in containers. The downside of containers is that they can be heavy and dry out faster than in-ground gardens.

Plants that require less care are good choices for the physically challenged gardener and include native plants, plants with low water requirements, and plants that don't need to be replanted every year (e.g., perennials and self-seeding annuals).

Smaller plants are also good; for example, dwarf fruit trees are half the height of standard fruit trees and are more accessible for pruning, thinning of fruit, pesticide applications, and harvesting.

A variety of tools makes gardening easier. Long-handled or telescoping tools allow gardeners to work from a sitting or non-bending position and extend their reach. Lightweight tools, made from aluminum alloy, carbon fiber or plastic, are less fatiguing to use. Tools with cushioned, non-slip grips; enhanced or specially angled grips; or cuffs that fit onto the forearm can relieve hand, wrist, and arm strain and increase strength.

A lightweight hose with an on/off valve at the nozzle end limits trips to the faucet. Watering wands facilitate watering of hanging baskets and across deep beds. Self-locking hose connectors make it easier to connect a hose to the faucet or a watering tool for those with stiff hands and wrists.

Kneelers (stools with raised handles) can help gardeners who have difficulty getting up from a kneeling position. Most kneelers, when turned upside down, can also be used as a stool for tending raised beds, resting or other activities.

Four-wheeled garden carts, wagons or large garbage cans with wheels can be used to move plants, tools and other supplies from place to place and are better than wheelbarrows for gardeners with limited strength or balance problems.

An apron or smock with large pockets or a tool bag that straps around your waist can keep seed packets and hand tools within easy reach. Wheeled tool organizers can keep everything you need to garden in one place.

Whatever you do, start small! Concentrating your energies on a smaller garden and fewer plants can improve your chances for success!