

Gardening for Every Body

Regardless of your physical abilities, gardening is a hobby that can be enjoyed by everyone. First, a realistic self-evaluation of your physical limitations is essential before tackling any garden project. It makes no difference whether the project is a complete redesign of the garden or a simple weeding job; or whether you are 20 or 80 years old. Understanding your abilities will help you choose the size of your garden, the garden design, and the tools you use.

To assess mobility, ask yourself these questions.

- Can I get down to the floor and back up without assistance? Congratulations, you can do traditional ground-level gardening!
- Do I need to hoist myself in and out of the bathtub? You can try ground-level gardening, but you may want to do your gardening while sitting or standing.
- Do I have trouble bending or have balance or coordination limitations? Avoid bending or stooping. Choose a tool that will facilitate ground-level or overhead tasks.
- Do I have difficulty walking? Design the garden for walker or wheelchair accessibility. Purchase tool caddies to carry garden tools.
- Do I need to rest often? Design benches and lawn chairs into the garden and place them with a good view so the rest stops are pleasant.
- How far can I reach from either a sitting or standing position? Design your planting beds to be no wider than twice your reaching distance. For example, if you can easily reach two feet and you have access to both sides of the bed, then your planting bed should be no wider than four feet.

Your body is your most important and valuable gardening tool. The following suggestions may help prevent injury or stress when gardening.

Respect pain – Pain is the body's warning sign that something isn't right. When a garden activity causes pain, stop. Ask for help or try using an ergonomic, enabling, or adapted tool to make the chore less stressful.

Use good posture – Poor posture can lead to pain, fatigue, and strains. Do not slouch while working in the garden (or any other time, for that matter) and do not rest your weight on one leg or one arm while working.

Alternate body positions – Avoid staying in one position too long. Switch tasks often, going from bending jobs like picking beans to reaching jobs like trimming a vine. Bend, stretch, and move around often to avoid stiffness.

Avoid repetitive tasks – Repetitive tasks can lead to injury; trying to hoe just one more row or pull just a few more weeds can cause inflammation, tenderness, and pain in joints.

Use the strongest muscles – Use your legs, not your back, when spading or lifting. Use your forearm and elbow, not your wrist or fingers, when troweling. Use your palm, not fingers, to push levers or tools.

Choose the right tool – Do not use tools for tasks that they are not designed for. When using a tool, especially a power or cutting tool, understand what they are made for and how to use them properly.

Maintain your tools – Dull or malfunctioning tools cause fatigue. Keep blades clean and sharp on shovels, trowels, hoes, knives, and pruning shears.

Save your fingers – Many tools can pinch or cut the fingers. Repetitive use of the finger, such as in pressing a squeeze-trigger spray bottle, can cause damage to tendons and joints. Alternate finger-intensive activities with less demanding hand tasks, or switch from finger to finger as you work.

Watch hands and wrists – Hands and wrists are particularly susceptible to tendinitis or carpal tunnel syndrome. Repeated grip and release movements, like those used in operating pruning shears, are a prime cause of hand and wrist discomfort. Switch to a less hand-intensive task frequently, or alternate which hand you use.

Use carrying straps – Carrying heavy objects like water containers can cause hand and wrist injury, especially if handles bite into the flesh and cut off circulation. Add comfortable, non-slip handles or straps wherever possible.

Protect elbows and shoulders – Avoid excessive twisting and reaching. If you garden from a sitting position, make sure your work surface is low enough that you don't have to raise your hands above your shoulders.

Stretch, Stretch, Stretch – Just as in exercising, you need to prepare your joints and muscles for activity. Any stretching or warm-up exercise will work. Don't forget to take stretching breaks during the gardening session and stretch again when finished.

Remember your skin – Protect yourself from the sun with appropriate clothing, sunscreen, a wide-brimmed hat, and eye protection. Drink plenty of decaffeinated fluids and take breaks in the shade.

Gardeners walk, bend, sit, kneel, squat, crawl, reach, push and pull, grab and hold, and lift and carry. We often do these activities without thinking about them and how they affect our bodies. Be aware of these automatic movements and save that body for many future gardening chores.

References

Rogers, Patrick., Jan Powell. *Gardening with Limited Range of Motion*. Publication EM 8505. Oregon State University Extension Service, June 1992.

Funkenbusch, Karen, Marilee Bomor, and Marilyn Stanford. Basic Principles of prevention of Repetitive Motion Injury. Agricultural Engineering Extension, Missouri, November 2001.

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