

## Yoga for Gardeners

It happens every spring. The dark December days begin to lengthen and the sun teases us with borderline balminess. We itch to get outside and dig, especially after this harsh winter. For most of us, choosing seeds from our recliners, surfing the internet, or visualizing the changes we want to make are the only forms of gardening we have engaged in over the course of several months. Then finally comes one of our sunny days when it is nearly impossible to resist the urge to start those cleanup chores. One task morphs into another and before long you realize that you've been at it all day... And, oh yes, you can hardly get off the ground now. Luckily, there are a few simple stretches and methods of working we can practice that will tame early season achiness and perhaps even prevent injuries. Remember, runners don't run a marathon without warming up and neither should gardeners garden without doing the same.

To the exercise averse, don't let the word "Yoga" scare you. True yoga is not the pretzel shapes we see on the lithe limber twenty-something bodies, it is more a frame of mind, a gentleness and a marriage of mind and body. Although you may not be aware, all gardeners practice yoga. The bending, stretching, twisting, lifting motions replicate many yoga moves. Yoga is about mindfulness and as you, as a gardener, are respectful of the earth, be respectful of your body. No one wants to miss a gardening season because of an injury, so here are some simple stretches to relieve the early season creakiness. As with any activity, stop if there is any pain, and pay attention to what your body tells you. If you have any physical challenges at all, consult with your doctor. Yoga is about gain, no pain.

All stretches should be gentle, not forced. If you feel you need to move in a certain way, do it, but gently – your body knows what it wants, just listen. Remember to breathe.

1. Get blood to the extremities. Stand up straight and shake your hands, then your arms. Do the same with one foot and leg then the other. Feel warmth moving into these areas.
2. Wake up your shoulders. Raise one arm overhead and then lower, repeat with opposite arm. Move your head from side to side. Listen to it crackle. Do about 5 repetitions.
3. Wake up your shoulders some more. Interlace your hands above your head and gently let the hands drift backwards while lowering your chin. Now interlace your hands behind your back and lift, opening the front of your chest, squeezing the shoulder blades.
4. Stretch the Achilles tendon and the foot. Find a stair, hold on to something and place the ball of the foot on the stair, gently drop the heel. Repeat on opposite leg. Don't bounce.
5. Warm up the back and the legs. Gentle lunges are good for the legs; either a runner's stretch with one leg straight back or rest one knee on the ground. A great stretch for your back is cat/cow. Get on all fours with the spine flat in a neutral position. Gently round your back upward aiming your chin and tailbone toward each

other (angry cat), then slowly lift your head and tailbone upwards and gently lower your back (swayback cow). Do this several times.

Now take a walk around your garden, breathe deeply, relax and get started. As you go about your tasks, take time to scan your body. When you feel discomfort, change positions or change tasks. Move a little. Take some deep breaths. Anytime your back begins to hurt try a few cat/cow stretches.

Here are a few reminders to keep you healthy all season long.

1. Pace yourself. Take short breaks to gently stretch. Work in shorter chunks of time to give different muscle groups a chance to work and rest.
2. Lift with your legs not your back. Hold the object close to you to prevent unnecessary strain. Try more trips with lighter loads.
3. Avoid bending or twisting at the waist.
4. To avoid straining your lower back, let your arms and legs do the work when pulling a rake or pushing a hoe or shovel. Switch sides when possible. It may be awkward, but may relieve joint imbalances that may produce muscle spasms in the neck, shoulder and lower back.
5. Work below shoulder level whenever possible to avoid shoulder discomfort.
6. Use ergonomically correct tools.
7. Try not to garden in the hottest part of the day and always wear protective clothing and a good sunscreen whenever you are out working in the yard.
8. When you are breaking to change position (every 15 to 20 minutes or so), take a drink of water.

Gardening is great exercise. For those of us over 50 a University of Arkansas study in 2000 found that when compared to aerobics, dancing, and bicycling, doing yard work or weight training were the only two activities that helped significantly in maintaining bone mass and preventing osteoporosis. For those of you who need visuals, here are a couple short youtube videos that illustrate some of the stretches described above.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsnu3JDLU-U>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKYTdJB6CPc>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtxXgJGvt6E> (Post gardening stretches).

Time in the garden has a zen quality all its own. It can take your mind away from troubling thoughts as you stop and listen to the birds or notice a new bloom. Weeding, blackberry pulling or hand tilling is much cheaper than a therapist for stress relief. Enjoy the fruits of your labor. Congratulate your self on taking care of yourself and the earth.

## References

[Stretching for Gardeners](#)

[Yoga for Gardeners: Working the Soul](#)

[GARDEN NOTEBOOK: Serenity In the Dirt](#)

[Yoga for Gardeners](#)

[The Healthy and Safe Way to Garden](#)