

Gardening for the Elderly Work Smarter not Harder!

By Claudia Steen

Many people love to garden but older individuals may find it more difficult to continue planting and caring for a garden. Here are some ideas to help so that the elderly can continue to pursue gardening pleasures. If you may be among the adults who have trouble bending, squatting, pushing, or lifting, please continue to read for these helpful ideas. In other words, gardening often requires digging, hoeing, weeding, mowing, and watering. All those activities make a garden beautiful, however it can be especially hard on backs, shoulders, and knees.

There are many garden hand tools available now that make gardening easier if you have arthritis in your hands. Start with the right tools, and they may make it easier to do the work. Look for lightweight hand tools with resilient rubber handles and ergonomic designs that will be easier on your hands and require less effort, be sure and keep your tools sharp. Handle extenders can prevent stress and strain on your back. Add handle extenders to shovels and other gardening tools to reduce bending. Use a “reacher tool” to reduce stretching, reaching, and bending, especially if you have back problems or arthritis.

Another idea would be to construct raised beds. Assure regular raised bed include spots to sit on the edge of them. The bed should be narrow enough so that you can reach into the middle of it from the side. Raised beds have other advantages too. The soil warms up in them earlier and there is no soil compaction from walking on them. And if you use “the magic of mulch” and place the plants closer together so at maturity they will touch each other you will have very little weeding. Mulch can be simple grass clippings that are 3-4 inches deep, however, assure that no chemicals have been placed on the lawn. Also, in autumn leaves that fall from trees can be raked up (although, a leaf blower would be an easier way to gather them) cover the beds with mulch to decompose over the winter and make the soil more fertile.



They also have **keyhole raised beds** that are wheelchair accessible. Or a **single small bed** in which a wheelchair can go underneath.

And it is best if your garden area is near the house, so you don't have to walk so far and if you do have to walk, be sure the pathways are level so that you don't trip on uneven bricks, rocks, or pavers.

Containers also provide easy accessibility and can produce a variety of colorful and fragrant flowers, as well as delicious vegetables. They are much easier to manage than an in-ground garden. Experiment with different types of containers and look for containers on sale. Be creative and try old baby bathtubs, buckets, wheelbarrows or whatever you can find. Deeper containers are great for vegetables, the plants can even flow over the side if they trail such as cucumber, squash, melons, etc. Save your back by placing the container at the height that you want it, then filling it with soil, natural fertilizer, and plants. A layer of stones or broken pottery will improve drainage. Or add biodegradable items such as bark mulch, pinecones



or compost as this will lighten the weight of the containers. You should buy smaller bags of soil—they are much easier to handle.

Start small with your container gardens. It's easy to be dazzled at the garden center and buy more plants than you can handle. Pace yourself and buy only what you can eat as far as vegetables. And don't get carried away with too many flowers. Know your limits, plan carefully and use the right tools to have a garden you'll enjoy for years to come. With a little bit of planning, you can reduce the effort it takes to start and maintain a colorful and healthy garden so you can enjoy flowers and vegetables as you continue to age.

Another important idea - if you have grandchildren who want to learn about gardening, they can be a big help with doing a lot of the stretching, lifting, bending, and reaching for you. The added benefit is of course bonding with family. And remember children who have this experience often continue to garden as adults.

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.