

TIPS FOR GARDENING WITH ARTHRITIS

"A garden is a lovely thing" T. E. Brown

Gardening is a labour of love and one activity that many people with arthritis continue to find not only enjoyable but also therapeutic. With a little planning and adaptation, your garden can still be a source of great pleasure.

Adapting the Gardener

The first place to start with is the gardener's head! You know that you enjoy gardening and want to continue. Now look at your body as it is today. Ask yourself:

Where do I hurt?

How long can I work before I get tired?

How can I best plan my time?

Is it realistic for me to keep my garden?

The answer to the last question is "Yes!" And here's the plan.

Conserve Energy and Protect Your Joints

Ask yourself: Do I enjoy the heavy work? Do I have to do it?

- Check out seniors' networks at your community centre, churches, or service clubs.
- Identify those jobs that leave you overly tired, or cause pain for more than an hour. Then offer to trade jobs with a neighbour.
- Plan your garden work schedule. Do a little every day.
- Get a check-up by an occupational therapist to see if you are protecting your knees and feet with the right shoes or if splints would help support painful joints.
- Take a 10-minute break in every hour and sit on the seats you have built in your garden. You will keep going longer.
- Use a kitchen timer to monitor your activity and curb your enthusiasm.
- Try to gauge your energy level. It will vary from day to day. Don't finish your work feeling exhausted, you'll get discouraged.
- Respect pain. If you have pain for more than one hour after activity, reduce the length of the next gardening session, or increase your rest periods.

Use Raised Beds

Raised beds are better for your body, and they often make a better garden.

- Plan rest areas in your garden - benches, chairs, edges of raised beds, etc. Put them in areas where you can enjoy the beauty you've created.
- Beds should not exceed 1.3 m (4 ft.) in width, even if you can access them from both sides.

Cut Down on Carrying and Lifting

Don't ignore your needs for the sake of your garden's needs.

- Keep tool storage near to your intensive work areas.
- Beds should not be wider than 60 cm (2 ft) if access is from one side only.
- Minimize work of flower beds and borders; replace flowerbeds with shrubs, herbaceous and perennial plants that are easier to care for.
- Replace flower borders with paved or concrete areas on which you can display containers.

Minimize Lawn Care and Weed Control

Easy does it. Arthritis-friendly practices are practical for everyone. A beautiful garden need not have expanses of lawn.

- Use ground covers in place of lawn if you can. Or consider using patios, inorganic mulching or decorative rocks.
- Use a low stool to reduce the need to bend.
- If your coordination is good, find a stool with large wheels so that you can move more easily around your garden.
- Use landscape fabric to cut down on the amount of weeding.
- Mulch whenever possible.

Adapt the Tools

The tools you use can make all the difference.

- Use lightweight tools that are adapted for each specific task.
- Use long-handled tools where possible. The handle should be as long as your own height. This will give you better leverage and protect your back.
- Add a handle halfway down a long-handled tool for leverage.
- Pad the handles of hand tools with foam pipe insulation to enlarge the grip.
- Be on the lookout for tools that could reduce stress on the joints, such as long-handled clippers or a two-wheeled cart.
- Make sure your tools are sharp and well oiled; they're much easier to use.

Easier Walking

Getting around your garden in a safe, accessible manner is very important!

- Use ramps or gently sloping paths if walking is a problem.
- Paths should be 1 m (3 ft) in width; 1.3 m (4 ft) for wheelchairs.
- Paving slabs should have a rough surface for traction, with no more than 1/2 cm (1/4 in) space between, so that a walking aid won't get stuck.

Clean up, don't Trip up

- Take the time to clean up your tools and garden debris. It will help you avoid injury.
- Wear a multi-pocket apron for string, ties and clippers; make sure all the weight is not on your neck.

Container Gardening

A portable, potable garden allows your creativity to blossom.

- Use freestanding containers for planting. Be creative: try pipes, barrels or an old bathtub or sink.
- Raise the containers to your work level.
- Hanging baskets are easy to manage. You can even install a pulley to lower them for care and then raise them again. Use old thread bobbins as handgrips on the pulley ropes.

Grow "Up," Not "Out"

Reach new heights; maximize the space you have.

- Use fences or trellises to grow climbing plants and creeping vines.
- Grow dwarf fruit trees. The rewards are easier to reach.
- When building fences and trellises, think of them as potential handholds and seats. Build them sturdily and use them often.

Bring Your Garden Indoors

Don't restrict your pleasure. Think inside the walls too.

- Use a bay window, sunny room or warm window for a greenhouse.
- If you don't have enough light, use a specific grow lamp.
- Start a specialty such as bonsai, cactus, African violets or orchids.
- Try hydroponic gardening.
- Use worms to create compost in a plastic container indoors.

Planting

Sow the seeds of friendship: have a planting party.

- Use seed tapes instead of individual seeds. They take less work.
- Try using "patio" sized plants.
- If not using raised beds, use your garden fork tines to make the seed holes. Paint the tines to mark the depth.
- Use 1 m (3 ft.) long by 2.5 cm (2 in.) diameter PVC tube to drop seeds into the hole. Use a step-on bulb planter for tulips and daffodils.

Watering

There are many practical, inexpensive watering devices available.

- Cut down on watering where possible - use mulch.
- Use soaker hoses and leave them in place.
- Set up a sprinkler & leave it in place; use a timing device to turn it on & off.
- Plastic water wands let you reach without bending or reaching, so you can water and fertilize without strain.
- Make sure your watering can is a good design for two-handed use.
- Use a "red wagon" to move your watering can from place to place.
- Buy plant pots that have a reservoir attached.

Harvesting

Nothing is more satisfying than reaping the fruits of your labour.

- Use long-handled reachers. Barbeque tools are a great help.
- Use clippers that cut and hold the flower or vegetable.
- Tie a bag or can around your waist to carry the load as you walk, or use an apron with a large pocket; make sure all the weight is not on your neck.
- Use a child's wagon or a two-wheeled wheelbarrow to reduce the stress.
- Use clothes pins instead of twist ties; they're easier to manipulate.

ARTHRITIS FRIENDLY PRODUCT FOR GARDENERS

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Fiskars PowerGear®

Fiskars PowerGear pruners, loppers and hedge shears use a patented gear design to provide the user with an additional mechanical advantage. The unique gear system maximizes leverage and reduces cutting effort, strain and fatigue. Fiskars PowerGear products have earned The Arthritis Society's Arthritis Friendly logo, and will help gardeners with arthritis enjoy their favourite hobby.