Gardening is one of America’s favorite leisure outdoor activities. According to the National Gardening Association, more than 91 million U.S. households (28 million of whose members are over age 55) participate in some type of lawn or garden activity. Most gardeners, novice and experienced, agree gardening is good for the body, mind, and soul.

- Bodies are strengthened through gardening.
- Minds are refreshed through gardening’s therapeutic benefit of connecting with nature.
- Spirits are renewed through the quiet sanctuary of the garden.

But, for those who experience the effects of arthritis, aging, or physical limitations, gardening can become challenging and sometimes frustrating. Identifying each gardener’s individual needs, adapting his or her garden and gardening practices, and utilizing the wide variety of excellent tools and techniques available will ensure every gardener can participate as much as his or her capabilities permit.

Get a Handle on the Tools
Many tools are available that can help reduce the pain associated with gardening. Choosing the right tools can make a big difference in the extent of the aches and pains. Make sure the tools are the right size. Choose a hoe, cultivator, and rake that can be used without bending. Tools with telescoping handles that extend the reach can be less tiring on the back and hands, while the forearm grip can provide additional leverage when digging or weeding. Watering wands can reduce stress associated with over-reaching. Purchase lightweight and small-bladed tools to reduce the amount of load and resistance.

Ergonomically designed handles reduce the force and range of motion necessary to perform certain tasks. Pistol grip tools, with an L-bend in the handle and a forearm grip, keeps the wrist straight while working. By keeping the hand and wrist in a natural and comfortable position, these specially
designed handles ease the stress placed on the joints.

To extend the life and usefulness of tools, keep them clean, sharp, and well-oiled. This will make them easier to use and cut down on the effort needed for certain gardening tasks.

**Cultivate Comfort**
Prevent sore knees and backs by using benches or kneelers.

- Combination kneelers with handles help lower and raise the body using arm strength and can be flipped to use as benches.
- Use a caddy or garden tool apron to keep tools within easy reach. Aprons specially designed to be used with a wheelchair are available.
- A large-wheeled cart will help in moving plants and mulch without having to carry them and is easier on the back than a wheelbarrow.

Chemical-resistant gloves should be used when spraying pesticides, herbicides, oils or other chemicals. Get gloves that fit. Gloves that are too tight constrict movement and lead to pain.

And, don’t forget sun protection! Wear wide brim hats, light-weight long-sleeved shirts and sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher. Drink plenty of fluids, avoid being in the garden during the heat of the day and take breaks in the shade.

**Garden Smarter, Not Harder**
Reduce the effort required to care for the garden by using low-maintenance plants. Opt for perennials or shrubs instead of annuals which need replanting every year, especially in hard-to-reach areas of the garden. Pull weeds after watering or rain; moist soil makes weeding easier. Save the back by placing containers where wanted before filling. And, buy smaller bags of soil--they are much easier to handle.

Consider using a raised garden bed to bring plants from ground to waist level. Not only can raised beds provide better drainage and extend the growing season, they also make gardening more accessible by reducing bending.

**The Right Technique**
Warm up joints and muscles with a brief walk and some stretching before working in the garden. Work during the time of day when feeling the best. For example, if stiffness is more prevalent in the morning, then garden in the afternoon. Stretch during and after gardening to help prevent stiff muscles.

Switch tasks often. Repetitive motions or staying in one position too long can cause stiffness. Alternate
bending or stooping jobs with standing or reaching jobs, and take periodic breaks. Avoid slouching while gardening as poor posture can cause pain, fatigue and even strains.

Use the largest and strongest joints when possible. Lift with the legs instead of the back. When troweling, use the forearm and elbow instead of the wrist and fingers. Most importantly, respect pain! Despite one’s best effort, some aches, pains, and stiffness can still result from a day spent in the garden.

Stop working and rest if pain occurs. Consult a healthcare provider if the pain continues. If experiencing soreness or pain, reduce the amount of activity the next day. Try a warm bath to help relax stiff or sore muscles after gardening or heat and cold therapy to ease joint pain.

To Learn More

University of Wyoming Extension horticulture program fact sheets can help consumers with gardening. They can be accessed at: http://www.uwyo.edu/ces/sustainable-ag/comsumer-horticulture.html. Many local extension offices have horticultural reference information on hand ranging from fact sheets to on-site problem diagnostics (services vary by county). Master Gardeners in some counties can also handle consumer horticultural issues.

Finally, Wyoming AgrAbility developed the bulletin, Solutions for living: Tools for the enabled garden. B-1238, with examples of gardening tools that, regardless of limitation or chronic condition, allow almost everyone to enjoy the benefits of gardening. This bulletin can be downloaded by going to www.uwyo.edu/agrability and clicking on the Publication link.

(Article adapted from Solutions for living: Tools for the enabled garden and Endless gardening from Arkansas AgrAbility.)

WYOMING AGRABILITY:
DON'T LET THE DIRT HURT!

Stretch your way to a healthier you and a more beautiful garden in just 12 minutes!

Contact the Indiana Arthritis Foundation for information on stretches, gardening, or other agricultural activities toll-free at:

1-800-783-2342

OR

Visit the website at:

www.arthritis.org

For information on ranching/farming with disability:

Wyoming AgrAbility
(866) 395-4986
(307) 766-3052
www.uwyo.edu/agrability
agrability@uwyo.edu

A total of 12 minutes can help ease the muscle tension that arthritis causes. Stretching before, during, and after gardening will reduce tightness, stiffness, and enhance gardening enjoyment.

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