



TIPS, TRICKS EASE **ACHES AND PAINS** OF GARDENING GAINS

From switching to drip irrigation to planning perennials instead of annuals to using raised beds, simple transitions make big differences

Laura Balis and Tina Russell

Summer is here. Time to get outside and work in the garden!

If you've ever ended up with aches and pains after a day of twisting and bending tending to the garden, you know gardening can be hard on your body. The good news is there are steps to make gardening less painful and more enjoyable. By setting up the garden to avoid strain, using smart tools to lighten the workload, and taking time to prepare one's body, you can stay pain-free and enjoy the garden all season.

Set up Garden to Avoid Strain

Setting up the garden to make common garden tasks such as watering and weeding easier is one of the simplest ways to avoid aches and pains.

Consider spending a little extra time and money on cultural practices like drip irrigation and mulch.

Drip irrigation systems take away the need to lug heavy garden hoses day after day and are a more efficient method of getting plants adequate amounts of water. At the same time, pest and disease problems often associated with overhead watering systems are reduced.

Using mulches, either synthetic or natural – such as grass clippings or wood chips – between crop rows will reduce the labor-intensive routine of pulling stubborn weeds. Mulches also moderate soil temperatures for plants and conserve water.

Annuals need replanting every year. Planting perennial vegetables and herbs, flowers, shrubs, and trees during garden layout and design is another time- and labor-saving consideration. This is especially important for hard to access areas.

Think “inside the box” by building elevated raised beds that require less bending. Other options that reduce

the need to stoop is the use of containers, such as raised tiered boxes, antique claw foot bathtubs, mobile containers planted in old wheelbarrows or wagons, and even the installation of hanging baskets attached to simple pulley systems.

Planting vertical gardens in which plants grow up walls, fences, and trellises is also an alternative to traditional gardening that is gaining popularity. Gardeners don't spend hours with their hands and knees directly in the dirt.

Smart Tools Lighten Workload

Try using these smart tools to reduce workload and avoid pain:

- A kneeler with handles that, when flipped over, doubles as a mini portable bench. This will allow raising and lowering yourself using primarily arm strength and gives the option of sitting whenever needed.



- Long-handled tools act as levers, increasing the effect of your efforts by allowing a two-handed grip that dispenses the workload to larger muscle groups, thus reducing bodily strain. They also provide additional reaching ability for gardeners who may need to work while sitting.
- Easy-to-grip or ergonomic hand tools are other great additions to a gardener's tool kit. Tools made with large, textured, non-slip handles provide better grip. Tools with ergonomically designed handles reduce the force and range of motion required to perform certain tasks, which ideally causes less physical stress and can allow a gardener to work longer. Be cautious when purchasing ergonomic tools because they are not a one-size-fits-all option. What may work for a neighbor's body type may not work for you.
- Pistol grip tools with an "L bend" in the handle allow a person to keep their wrist completely straight as they work. They are designed to use less energy by keeping the wrist and forearm in proper alignment, which is

essentially when the hand is held at the same angle as the forearm. Remember, maximum grip strength is achieved when the wrist is in this neutral or relaxed position.

- Acquiring lightweight aluminum and spring action garden tools can also reduce muscle and joint strain.
- Watering wands can ease muscle strain. They come in handy when watering hanging plants and hard to reach corners. They are available in many different styles with varying spray patterns and flow control measures.
- A bucket organizer, gardening cart with wheels, or a simple muck bucket cart can carry all of the tools with less strain.

Gloves can also help keep you comfortable. Wear appropriate, non-slip grip gloves that will protect hands from cuts, blisters, drying soil, insect bites, and more. Cotton or cotton-polyester blend gloves are a good choice for light garden work. Heavier garden tasks such as pruning or bush removal will likely require quality leather gloves.

Take time to Prepare Body

Treating your body right by warming up, pacing yourself, and using good posture can reduce soreness that could keep you from gardening.

Warm up muscles before gardening. There are many ways. Any type of exercise using the major muscles of the body and increases heart rate will work. Take a brisk walk around the block or around the garden if it's

large! Then, add in some arm circles to get your upper body warmed up, too, and you'll be ready.

Take frequent breaks. Stopping to survey your work gives muscles a break and allows more time gardening. Switching positions often is also helpful so one muscle group can take a break while another is worked. You could alternate sitting down and tending to raised beds by standing and using long-handled tools.

Good posture can help reduce post-gardening pain. Standing or sitting up straight when working reduces back strain. Think about letting the larger and stronger joints do the work whenever possible. For example, when picking up heavy items like watering cans, bend with your knees and hips instead of your back, and carry these items close to your body as you walk.

Don't forget to stretch after gardening, when your muscles are warmed up. Stretching can help increase flexibility and range of motion and prevent muscle strains. Target the major muscles used that day, like your back, shoulders, forearms, and hamstrings.

The first time in the garden each summer can leave you feeling sore, just like any type of exercise not done for a while. Knowing your limits and pacing yourself will help reduce soreness. Gradually add more time in the garden as your muscles adapt to the work, and you'll be able to enjoy your garden all season long.

Finally, stay comfortable in the garden by protecting yourself from the sun. Use sunscreen, and dress for sun protection with wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses. And don't forget to bring a water bottle with you to stay hydrated while you're working in the sun.

For more information

- *Solutions for Living: Tools for the Enabled Garden*. Randolph Weigel and Chelsea Hampton, Wyoming AgrAbility / University of Wyoming Extension. Bulletin B-1238, December 2012. Free download at bit.ly/toolsolutions
- *Endless Gardening*. Jessica Vincent, Arkansas AgrAbility Project Coordinator. Bulletin FCS729, 2012. Free download at bit.ly/forevergarden
- *Gardening Health and Safety Tips*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2015. www.cdc.gov/family/gardening



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