Healthy Gardening

**GARDENING** is one of the most popular pastimes for Americans, but doing it incorrectly can lead to back pain, joint aches, and muscle strains. Gardening can also be difficult for people with health conditions that limit movement (such as arthritis) or cause fatigue. But with a few easy strategies, gardening can be a pleasurable and safe activity for all.

Developed by occupational therapy practitioners, the following tips will help decrease the aches, pains, and strains that often occur during gardening. Occupational therapy practitioners take a holistic approach and develop strategies to help people do the things they want and need to do no matter their limitations, disability, disease, or condition. Don't let physical limitations hinder your ability to create and care for a garden that you love.

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<tr>
<th>If you want to:</th>
<th>Consider these activity tips:</th>
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<td>Plant and weed without pain.</td>
<td>Start with a small garden that you can manage easily. The garden should be located near your house and water supply to reduce time spent hauling the hose or watering can. Self-coiling hoses are lightweight and easy to use. Use a kneeler seat, which is a combination kneeling platform and seat. Many kneeler seats fold for easy storage. Make sure that the folding mechanism is easy to operate and does not cause stress on your hands.</td>
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<td>Avoid back pain from heavy lifting.</td>
<td>Bags of mulch, soil, and fertilizer are heavy. Instead of lifting the whole bag, divide it into smaller loads, and use a two-wheeled garden cart to move materials, as it is more stable than a wheelbarrow. When lifting a bag, use your leg muscles (not your back). Ask for help or consider hiring someone to assist with heavier tasks.</td>
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<td>Conserve energy to be able to garden longer.</td>
<td>Sit while gardening to decrease stress on your back, knees, and hips. Take rest breaks every 15 minutes and stop work before you become overtired. Vary your tasks to avoid overstressing one part of the body. Change your position frequently to avoid becoming stiff. Tightly gripping or pinching a tool for a long time can lead to swelling in your hands and arms, and prolonged hunching or kneeling can cause back strain and knee pain. Resist the urge to focus on just one area of the garden at a time, and instead move around doing various tasks.</td>
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<td>Protect your joints and avoid awkward positions while using pruners and other garden tools.</td>
<td>Select garden tools that have padded and curved handles to protect the joints in your hands and fingers from excess pressure and strain. If you have a weak grip, use pruners and clippers that have racheting or spring-action self-opening features. Avoid twisting and reaching while planting or pruning.</td>
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If you want to:

Spend more time enjoying the fruits of your labor.

Consider these activity tips:

Carefully consider how much maintenance your garden will need. When possible, use native plants. Plant groundcovers to keep weeds to a minimum. Once established, perennials require less work than planting annuals every year. Think about how large each plant will get, and the amount of pruning that will be required.

The following is adapted from Amy Wagenfeld, PhD, OTR/L, CAPS; and Bernice Buresh, BA, “Ergonomic gardening: Teaching safe movement patterns,” *OT Practice, 17*(9), 8–11.

### Planting & Weeding
Kneeling without cushioning and with your back arched strains your knees and back. Keeping your body straighter, using a kneeler, and kneeling with one leg up reduces the strain.

### Lifting
Lifting from your waist strains your neck, shoulders, and back. Lifting with your knees bent uses the much stronger leg muscles.

### Reaching
Your body is off balance when you reach overhead with your arms outstretched. Keep your feet firmly on the ground (no tip-toes) and use a reacher or pull branches down to your level before pruning them.

**Need More Information?**

If you would like to see an occupational therapy practitioner for more strategies on gardening or any other activities that you’re having difficulty completing, ask your physician for a referral or look for occupational therapists with private practice in your community. Occupational therapy practitioners are employed by private and community outpatient clinics, hospitals, and home-care services. Medicare and other health insurance policies cover their services. You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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