

Sage Advice for the Aging Gardener

By Deborah North, Master Gardener

There are many great things about gardening:

- You get lots of vitamin D.
- It provides pretty good exercise.
- The latest research indicates that we absorb serotonin (the neurotransmitter that helps produce healthy sleep patterns and boosts our mood) through contact with the soil.
- Gardening provides many challenging problems to solve using both sides of the brain.
- And you are never finished – so there is always something to look forward to doing.

However, I am finding that as I age, I need to modify a good many of my gardening habits, tools and behaviors. The need for change begins subtly and seems to be accelerating. For some of us it begins with a tweak in the back, arthritis in the knees or hips, or perhaps loss of muscle strength in the hands. There are some obvious and potentially pricey changes we can make such as converting to raised beds and moving to more native, low-maintenance plants. But there are also smaller, more moderate changes that are easy and fun to put into practice.

One of the exciting things about being part of the baby boom generation is that our numbers can drive change. Because gardening is a very lucrative business, people see the marketplace potential and they are innovating to keep us active – and our dollars flowing. So for boomers, the resources for aging are vastly improved over those for prior generations.

My first priority is to remain safe. In order to remain safe, we must do a bit of soul searching. Ask yourself, what are my particular challenges? How can I modify things to ensure my continued safety? Personally, I have some trouble lifting my right leg due to sciatica and the nerve pain causes pain while bending. So, part of my regime is to make sure that there are no tripping hazards such as loose hoses lying around; I make sure that walkways are solid, even, cleanly swept and uncluttered; I am very watchful of my pet's location; and I try to make sure no tools are left lying around. One minor tweak or trip can cause enough pain to put me out of commission for several days.

Warming up before 'serious' gardening is essential to ensure that we can bend over and get up from sitting or kneeling positions. One of my fellow Master Gardeners, MarciBeth Phillips, passed on some great advice for warming up properly. Before she gets started with the heavier work in the garden she spends 10 – 15 minutes weeding. This is the old bend over and pull the weeds kind of weeding – no scuffle hoe. It is a great technique for getting the synovial fluid moving to reduce the friction between the joints. I try to continue with regular bending and position changes that counter my gardening motions. Too long in one position is pretty difficult.

In general, be careful to make sure that tools are in their upright and nose down position. This means that shovels should be lip down, rakes should be tines toward the dirt, and hoes should be blade down and so on. Make sure that your tools are kept sharp and clean AND sized properly for the job. Hand pruners are not loppers and there are different sized loppers for different diameters of wood. **The most dangerous tool is a dull cutting tool – and this includes shovels.** Keep a small honing tool on hand to manage nicks and slight dulling of blades. Sharp tools reduce the wear and tear on joints as well as providing safer cutting.

Speaking of tools, choose and purchase wisely. Well built, great quality tools with long or curved handles will help provide better leverage and cutting power so we exert less energy and put less stress on those joints. Make sure that the handles are brightly colored or paint them an obnoxious bright shade so that they are easier to find when dropped – or left behind. If you have a beloved tool and the handle diameter is too narrow for your grip, try using a small pool noodle wrapped around the handle. Attach it securely. This is a great tip for bucket and wheelbarrow handles.

Remember that while we can take our gardening seriously, this activity is, for most of us, a major part of how we enjoy our lives. **Take care to protect yourself** – sunscreen (include the lips), broad brimmed hats, secure and safe clothing, have water and cell phone nearby and pace yourself. Make your garden a safe and healthy haven for yourself and your family and friends!

References & Helpful Resources

The Illustrated Practical Guide to Gardening for Seniors: How to Maintain Your Outside Space with Ease Into Retirement and Beyond by Patty Cassidy (2011)

The Age-Proof Garden: 101 Practical Ideas and projects for stress-free, low-maintenance senior Gardening by Patty Cassidy (2013)

Gardening for Seniors by Patty Cassidy

Gardening for a Lifetime by Sydney Eddison

Gardening for Seniors – Joyous Activities for Elderly Gardeners with Tips for Reduced Mobility by Andrea Kalli.

Stand Up and Garden by Mary Moss-Sprague

Gardening Through Your Golden Years by Jim Wilson

Examples of gardens designed for aging: Chicago Botanic Garden, the Buehler Enabling Garden.

Ergonomics-Info.com - <http://www.ergonomics-info.com/ergonomic-gardening-tools.html>

Radius Garden Tools - <https://radiusgarden.com/collections/cutting-tools>

Supplies for aging and arthritis: <http://www.arthritissupplies.com/>

Bionic Gardening Gloves available widely online.

<http://blog.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/helpful-garden-tools/>

