

Health and Safety Tips for Gardeners With Disabilities

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Your body is your most important and valuable gardening tool. The following suggestions can help prevent injury or undue stress when gardening:

- Respect pain. Pain is the body's warning sign that something isn't right. When a garden activity causes pain, STOP. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Also, try using an ergonomic, enabling, or adapted tool to make the gardening work easier on you.
- Poor posture can lead to pain, fatigue, and strains. Don't sit slouched over while you garden and don't rest your weight on one leg or arm while you work.
- Avoid staying in one position too long. Switch tasks often, going from bending jobs like picking beans and reaching jobs like trimming a vine. Bend, stretch, and move around often to avoid stiffness.
- Repetitive tasks can lead to injury; trying to hoe just one more row or pull just a few more weeds can cause inflammation, tenderness, and pain in joints.
- Use the strongest and largest joints and muscles for the job. Use your legs, not your back, when spading or lifting. Use your forearm and elbow, not your wrist or fingers, when troweling. Use your palms to push levers or tools, not your fingers.
- Use splints, supports, and assistive devices whenever possible, but ONLY after consulting with your physician or therapist.
- Follow and read all manufacturers' labels for safety tips and instructions.
- Careless use of tools, or using at tasks, for which they were not designed, is asking for trouble.
- When using any tool – and especially power tools – be sure that you understand its operation thoroughly.
- Keep blades clean and sharp, not only on knives and pruning shears, but on shovels, trowels, and hoes as well. Dull tools cause fatigue.

- Save your fingers. Tools can pinch or cut them and the repetitive use of the finger, such as in pressing a squeeze-trigger spray bottle, can cause damage to tendons and joints. Alternate finger-intensive activity with less demanding hand tasks or switch from finger to finger as you work.
- Watch hands and wrists, which are particularly susceptible to tendinitis or carpal tunnel syndrome. Repeated grip-and-release movements, like those used in operating pruning shears, are a prime cause of hand and wrist discomfort. Switch from pruning to less hand-intensive work frequently or alternate which hand you use.
- Carrying heavy objects like watering containers can cause hand and wrist injury, especially if handles bite into flesh and cut off circulation. Make sure all handles and carrying straps are thick enough to provide you with a comfortable grip. Add comfortable, non-slip padding wherever necessary.
- Protect elbows and shoulders from damage caused by excessive twisting and reaching. If you garden from a sitting position, make sure your work surface is low enough that you won't have to raise your hands above your shoulders.
- Protect yourself from the effects of the sun. Wear lightweight clothing, long sleeved shirt, big brimmed hat, eye protection, sunscreen of at least SPF 15, and other protective gear. Avoid being out between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Drink plenty of decaffeinated fluids to prevent dehydration. Also, allow time for breaks in the shade.

For additional information contact your local Outreach and Extension Service or the University of Missouri-Columbia, 1.800.995.8503.

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