

Gardening for mind and body

For many of us the thought of gardening makes us think of work. My garden presents me with a never ending round of weeding, mowing, mulching and manoeuvring heavy objects around a difficult terrain. However, gardening offers a really complete mental as well as physical workout. Gardening brings you into a close relationship with the fundamentals of life. It allows you to mark the passing of the seasons in a real way, all too important for those of us who work daily within the confines of an office.



Gardening has been one of my favourite pastimes for around 30 years. My current garden offers me the opportunity to get out into the privacy of my backyard to do what I want: to turn it into an oasis of peace and tranquillity. At least that's the aspiration. Most of the time my form of gardening consists of the repetitive and time consuming chores of weeding, pruning, trimming, mowing, mulching, raking and so on.

According to research, gardening can present as many physically demanding challenges as popular forms of exercise (see sidebar page 27). If this is the case, then the logical extension of this fact is that gardening not only presents great opportunities for improving one's health but can also provide potential injuries for the unwary. The physical demands of gardening, although seemingly low impact, can place an immense strain on bodies unused to physical activity. Gardening requires repetitive stretching, bending, kneeling, twisting and lifting, all of which can cause injury if the gardener is not prepared.

So how do we maximise our gardening enjoyment whilst minimising our risk of injury? Firstly, if you are unused to any physical activity or if you are recuperating after an illness or accident, go to your GP and get a check up. Over exertion is dangerous as it can lead not only to short term injury but could also exacerbate a pre-existing condition or cause a long term incapacity. Secondly, before you even open the garden shed, do some sort of warm up exercises.

A great website is www.gardenfitness.com as it shows you some basic stretching exercises which are specifically suited to gardening. Thirdly, think about the not so obvious side effects from the physical activity associated with gardening. Dehydration will occur even on cooler days, so make sure you refresh yourself with fresh water. Tea and coffee are good for a break but remember that they are diuretics and can be the cause of increased fluid loss. Take care with your skin and eyes. Wear gloves at all times as they will prevent chafing and blistering. Keep your arms and legs covered to prevent injury from insects or thorns. Wear safety glasses when mowing

or using a whipper snipper or chain saw. Safety glasses are also important when pruning, especially if you are lopping branches overhead. When you are handling potentially toxic substances such as composts, potting mixtures, insect sprays and other chemicals, don't be too proud to wear a dust mask or, if needs be, a more sophisticated mask designed for the material you are using. And don't forget a hat and sunscreen even on cloudy days. An important point to remember is always wash your hands well after gardening, especially if you are going to eat, prepare food or perform a BGL test.

Okay, the safety drill is out of the way. You've warmed up. What next? Inspiration for creating a beautiful garden can come from all sorts of places. There are wonderful books, television series and documentaries all of which can be accessed from your library. Walk around your neighbourhood and have a look at the gardens. If you've never performed a garden safari before, you will be amazed at how open people will be when it comes to talking about their gardens. If you do strike up a conversation with someone about their garden, ask them about the species they've chosen to grow. Every area is different and a casual stroll around your block will quickly demonstrate to you what plants and trees are best suited to your district.

The Open Garden scheme is a wonderful way to view magnificent gardens and meet enthusiastic gardeners. Striking up friendships with other gardeners presents all sorts of opportunities from sharing information and trade secrets to finding out where the least expensive raw materials can be obtained. Of course another benefit is being

able to swap plants and tall tales. Don't forget to visit your local parks, botanical gardens and other public landscaped spaces. A lot of these areas have been designed, or are managed, by professional horticulturalists and, although they may have a certain casually organised air about them, they have been constructed to require low maintenance and to grow quickly and successfully.

What about those of us who live in units and don't have gardens? There are several ways of getting into gardening without having your own space. Put an ad in your local newsagent's window advertising

yourself as a novice gardener keen to look after someone's garden.

Join a gardening club or even look for some space you can rent cheaply in someone's existing garden. This kind of allotment can be fantastic if it is set up to grow vegetables,

herbs and flowers. You really will save

yourself some money by growing your own veg and summer salads.

It's important to remember that gardening isn't all about extreme physical labour. Some forms of gardening can be far more gentle, with the benefits coming from an increased sense of peace, contentment and satisfaction from the success of raising something beautiful from a seed or cutting. If you are suffering from a condition that reduces your mobility you can still start and manage a garden that will give you pleasure and time in the fresh air. Raised garden beds are great for people in wheelchairs and smaller versions of gardens can be set up on balconies or in restricted spaces.

If you are new to gardening, you will need a range of tools to help you with your new pastime. Make a list of some of the jobs you imagine you will be

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doing in your garden then develop a list of tools that you think you need. Buy the best you can afford. This is particularly true of secateurs, pruning shears and garden saws. A few extra dollars spent on higher quality versions of these items will mean that you have tools that will last a lifetime. Choose a good spade, fork and potting trowel. Try them out in the shop and make sure they feel suitable for your body. Ensure that the handles are comfortable and that they are not too heavy for prolonged use.

You will also need a leaf rake, nail rake, cultivator and broom. I find the best leaf rakes are the plastic one as they are not too heavy. Nail rakes are good for laying out seed beds and for spreading composts. I'm fortunate in having one that belonged to my grandad. He made it and it's not as wide or heavy as the ones available in shops. Millet brooms are good (and cheap) for sweeping around steps although they do wear out quite quickly. You will also need some sort of wheelbarrow. Buy one that you think will suit your requirements and ensure it is easy for you to use. While you're shopping pick up a couple of pairs of inexpensive gloves, preferably two pairs, one lightweight and the other heavyweight. A great way to pick up good quality garden tools is to go to garage sales. You will be amazed at what you will find.

Gardening gives you the ability to get out into the fresh air all year round, as there are always tasks to be performed, even in the winter months. If you find that mowing your lawn is too much of a chore for you it may be best to hire a professional to take care of that duty. Powered mowers can be expensive to buy and maintain and it may save you cash as well as injury to pay someone to do this. Professional gardeners can also advise you on feeding your lawns. Push powered mowers are a terrific alternative for small lawns and will give you some really good exercise. Personally, I'm a great believer in the reduction, if not removal, of lawns from the urban landscape. Even though they can look great, they are demanding when it comes to maintenance and they can place a huge strain on the precious resource of fresh water. My garden is now mainly gravelled and uses hardy natives that are drought tolerant. Running water in the form of a small stream and waterfall breaks the potential monotony of the gravel. A quick rake is all that is needed now and again to make the garden look tidy. Sure beats pushing a noisy lawnmower around.

The lower part of my garden consists of a rather bedraggled grass covered area (not lawn!) with a few lovely trees. This spring I'm going to start mulching and removing the grass to eventually cover it in low growing natives. No more whipper-snipper for me. Yippee!

The most appealing thing for me about gardening is that once the digging, raking, planting, cutting, trimming, barrowing, staking, weeding and composting is done, I can use my garden for the physical activities that I really enjoy which include laying prostrate and snoozing. **D**

Article by Jonathan Jones, Manager Communications and Development, Diabetes TASMANIA. This article originally published in dat's news spring 2006 edition.

Useful links

www.greenweb.com.au/garden/html/seniors_garden.html

www.oznet.ksu.edu/news/sty/2004/gardening_exercise042604.htm

www.gardenfitness.com

www.opengarden.org.au

On a scale of 1 to 10 this list will indicate the levels of effort exerted during gardening tasks versus conventional exercise

Effort expended in gardening activities

- 1.5 Watering lawn or garden, standing or walking
- 2.5 Walking, applying fertiliser, or seeding a lawn, mowing lawn, riding mower.
- 3.5 Trimming shrubs or trees, using a power cutter
- 4.0 Raking lawn, stacking grass and leaves, planting seeds, plants and shrubs
- 4.5 Mowing lawn with a power mower, weeding, cultivating garden, planting trees, manually trimming trees and shrubs
- 5.0 Carrying, loading and stacking wood, clearing land, hauling branches, digging a sandbox, laying turf
- 6.0 Chopping wood, splitting logs, mowing lawn with hand mower, gardening with heavy power tools, tilling, shoveling a light load – less than 4kgs per minute

Comparison of effort expended in other activities

- 0.9 Lying quietly, reclining, sleeping
- 1.5 Sitting, knitting, sewing
- 2.3 Walking – shopping
- 3.0 Carpentry, general, workshop, bowling
- 3.5 Walking on the level at a moderate pace on a firm surface
- 4.0 Cycling less than 5kph, water aerobics, fishing
- 4.5 Cleaning – heavy or major, playing golf
- 5.0 Softball, baseball, social cricket, cycling,
- 6.0 Aerobics, swimming
- 7.0 Jogging
- 8.0 Social basketball

Gardening is an excellent means of diverting the mind from work, family conflicts or other issues, thereby relieving stress and providing mental relaxation. Gardening is a relaxing activity, great for unwinding after a difficult day at work, especially when gardening on a small and personal scale. Keeping plants in good health satisfies the human instinct to nurture and to provide care. Gardeners are rewarded for their efforts when the plants they have grown flower, produce beautiful fruit and maintain a healthy appearance.