

Gardening When You Have Chronic Pain

Gardening is a great activity for maintaining flexibility, range of motion and strength, and is a good form of physical, mental and social therapy that can improve quality of life. Doing too much for too long, however, can cause increasing pain. The good news is you do not have to give up the many benefits of gardening. Making changes in how you plan and carry out tasks in the garden can prevent pain, strain and drain. Here are a few suggestions.

Getting started in the garden

Plan to garden during a time of the day when you feel best. Wait until your pain and stiffness has decreased and your energy level is at its highest.

Take time to warm up

We often take a shower after working in the garden but a warm shower before, or use of warm packs, can also help to warm up your muscles before gardening. Five minutes of stretching and walking will also help to prepare your body for the activity.

What to wear when gardening

Wear lightweight, loose fitting clothes that are easy to move in, a gardening apron or tool belt with pockets to keep supplies close, knee pads to cushion and protect your knees, gloves with a rubber coating to give you a better grip, and comfortable shoes with good arch support, shock absorbent soles, and cushioned insoles.

Adjusting your thinking and expectations of what gardening looks like

At one time you may have gone to the store, purchased plants and soil, returned home and planted all your gardens in one afternoon. Doing this now may put you out for days or weeks. Modify your gardening expectations to match your current energy level and limitations.

Low maintenance gardens

Consider a garden with low maintenance plants such as hostas, ornamental grasses, shrubs and perennials that bloom every year. Ask about plants and flowers that require little care, such as those that don't need regular watering, dead heading and pruning. Choose young plants to avoid dealing with tiny seeds. Make sure your garden has a nearby water source so you are not carrying watering cans and hose too far, and a nearby storage area to avoid wasting energy hauling your tools back and forth.

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Adapt your garden environment

Consider using raised garden beds, trellises, window boxes, hanging baskets, plant stands and tall urns to reduce stooping and bending.

Use the right tools

Shovels, rakes, and other tools that are light weight and have longer handles, and garden stools you can sit on while working in the garden help reduce stress on your back. If you must kneel, use knee pads or a garden kneeler with handles to making getting off the ground easier. Tools can be purchased at hardware and big box stores, online or specialty stores such as Lee Valley.

Limit lifting and carrying

Use a small wagon or three-wheeled wheel barrow for transporting tools, dirt and plants around the yard. Divide heavy loads such as soil and mulch into more manageable amounts. Use a wheeled watering can or a hose cart to move watering systems around the yard, or look into an irrigation system. When you do lift, keep the back straight, have your feet shoulder width apart, bend from the knees and keep the object close to your body and directly in front of you. Consider asking for help with heavier lifting.

Limit overreaching

A comfortable reach is between the shoulder and waist level and a comfortable outward reach is inside an imaginary arc you would draw if you extended your arms and drew a half circle in front of you. Keep this in mind when organizing your shed and avoid planting plants and flowers that need a lot of care outside of this reach. Installing shelves and hooks in your shed for garden tools and using long handled devices, reachers and raised beds when gardening will help you to avoid overreaching.

Limit twisting at the waist

When raking or sweeping, stand upright and keep the tool close to your body, avoid bending your back and overreaching, and try keeping your nose and toes in the same direction. Walk with the rake or broom or use a push broom instead. Alternating the side you are holding tools on can also be helpful in improving your tolerance for the activity.

Vary your tasks

Pinching, gripping, pulling or lifting for long periods of time can cause increasing pain. Changing your position frequently will keep you from becoming stiff and sore. Vary the tasks you do throughout the day to avoid too much stress on any one group of muscles. For example, alternate heavier and lighter tasks, and kneeling, sitting and standing tasks like watering and weeding.

Slow down

Working too quickly may cause your muscles to become tense, which is when you are more likely to injure yourself or make mistakes. Slowing down will help you manage your pain and conserve energy.

Pace yourself

Too many hours of gardening at one time can put you out of commission for days. Pay attention to your body and find your tolerance level. Set a timer to cue you to take breaks. Have a chair close by so you can sit, have a cold drink, reward yourself for the work you have done and enjoy your garden.