

Tips for gardening with arthritis

"A garden is a lovesome thing"

T. E. Brown

Gardening is a labour of love and one activity that many people with arthritis continue to find not only enjoyable but also therapeutic. With a little planning and adaptation, your garden can still be a source of great pleasure.

Adapting the gardener

The first place to start with is the gardener's head! You know that you enjoy gardening and want to continue. Now take off the rose-tinted glasses and look at your body as it is today. Ask yourself:

Where do I hurt?

How long can I work before I get tired?

How can I best plan my time?

Is it realistic for me to keep my garden?

The answer to the last question is "Yes!" And here's the plan.

Conserve Energy and Protect Your Joints

Do you enjoy the heavy work? Do you have to do it?

- Check out seniors' networks at your community centre, churches, service clubs or boy scouts. Try advertising for help at the local high school or in a newspaper. Some of these local services are free.
- Identify those jobs that leave you overly tired, or cause pain for more than an hour. Then offer to trade jobs with a neighbour.
- Plan your garden work schedule. Do a little every day.
- Get a check-up by an occupational therapist to see if you are protecting your knees and feet with the right shoes or if splints would help support painful joints.
- Take a 10-minute break in every hour and sit on the seats you have built in your garden. You will keep going longer. While you're resting, try to work out ways to do jobs differently that will conserve your energy and protect your painful joints.
- Use a kitchen timer to monitor your activity and curb your enthusiasm.
- Respect pain. If you have pain for more than one hour after activity, reduce the length of the next gardening session, or increase your rest periods.
- Try to gauge your energy level. It will vary from day to day. Don't finish your work feeling exhausted—you'll get discouraged.
- Be on the lookout for tools that could reduce stress on the joints, such as long-handled clippers or a two-wheeled cart.
- Make sure your tools are sharp and well oiled. It'll make them easier to use.

Adapting your garden

- Easier Walking
- Getting around your garden in a safe, accessible manner is very important!
- Use ramps or gently sloping paths if walking is a problem.

- Paths should be 1 m (3 ft.) in width—1.3 m. (4 ft.) if a wheelchair turn is essential.
- Paving slabs should have a rough surface for traction, with no more than 1/2 cm. (1/4 in.) space between, so that a walking aid won't get stuck.
- Stepping stones should be at least 60 cm. (2 ft.) in diameter—or wider if you're using a walking aid.
- Keep your walking surfaces moss-free with a commercial moss killer. Moss can be very slippery.

Easier Resting

Pace yourself when working in the garden. Remember it is a labour of love.

- Plan rest areas in your garden—benches, chairs, edges of raised beds, etc. And put them in areas where you can enjoy the beauty you've created.

Minimize Lawn Care

A beautiful garden need not have expanses of lawn.

- Use ground covers in place of lawn if you can. Or consider using patios, inorganic mulching or decorative rocks.

Easier Watering

Quenching their thirst helps growing plants thrive.

- Have pipe installed, with many sockets, the length of your garden. This allows you to use lighter, shorter lengths of garden hose.
- Enquire about commercially installed watering systems.
- Easy to install irrigation systems are also available.

Cut Down on Carrying and Lifting

Don't ignore your needs for the sake of your garden's needs.

- Keep tool storage near to your intensive work areas.
- Minimize Work of Flower Beds and Borders
- Simplicity provides a natural appeal.
- Beds should not be wider than 60 cm (2 ft) if access is from one side only.
- Replace flowerbeds with shrubs, herbaceous and perennial plants that are easier to care for.
- Replace flower borders with paved or concrete areas on which you can display containers. Containers can be a lot less work than full flower beds and borders.

Weed Control

Easy does it. Arthritis-friendly practices are practical for everyone.

- Mulch whenever possible.

- Use ground cover to keep out weeds.
- Use landscape fabric under the topsoil before planting.

Use Raised Beds

Raised beds make sense. They're better for your body, and they often make a better garden.

- You can sit or stand to garden comfortably. Beds should not exceed 1.3 m (4 ft.) even if you can access them from both sides.
- You can cut down on your work by gardening intensively in smaller areas.

Container Gardening

A portable, potable garden allows your creativity to blossom.

- Use freestanding containers for planting.
- Raise them to your work level. Be creative: try stacked tires, barrels, concrete drain pipes, metal drums, flue pipes, an old bathtub or sink.
- Hanging baskets are easy to manage. You can even install a pulley to lower them for care and then raise them again. Use thread bobbins as handgrips on the pulley rope.

Grow "Up," Not "Out"

Reach new heights; maximize the space you have.

- Use fences or trellises to grow climbing plants and creeping vines, and zucchini. Do this with raised beds, too.
- When building fences and trellises, think of them as potential handholds and seats. Build them sturdily and use them often.
- Espaliered fruit trees are easier to harvest and care for.
- Grow dwarf fruit trees. The rewards are easier to reach.

Bring Your Garden Indoors

Don't restrict your pleasure. Think inside the walls too.

- Use a bay window, sunny room or warm window for a greenhouse.
- If you live in an apartment, you can still have a garden—on the roof, on your balcony or in window boxes.
- If you don't have enough light, use a specific grow lamp, or fluorescent tubes.
- Start a specialty such as bonsai, cactus, African violets or orchids.
- Try hydroponic gardening.
- Use worms to create compost in a plastic container indoors.

Adapting the tools

The tools you use can make all the difference. Use lightweight tools that are adapted for each specific task. Easier ways of gardening make sense.

Soil Preparation

Sensible gardening starts from the ground up.

- Use easy compost bins or wire enclosures.
- Compost by "digging in" kitchen and garden refuse. Add nitrogen if you're using this method.
- Lightweight spades with extra handle length will give you better leverage and protect your back.
- Check the length of handle on the tools you use regularly. They should be as long as your own height. The shorter the handle, the more effort you have to put out for digging or pruning.

Planting

Sow the seeds of friendship: have a planting party.

- Use seed tapes instead of individual seeds. They take less work.
- If not using raised beds, use your garden fork tines to make the seed holes. Paint the tines to mark the depth. Use 1 m (3 ft.) long 2.5 cm (2 in.) diameter PVC tube to drop seeds into the hole. That way, you don't have to bend over or kneel down.
- Let peas and beans germinate in wet newspaper before planting.
- Use a step-on bulb planter for tulips and daffodils.
- Allow plants to self-seed.

Weeding and Cultivating

Easier does it. Arthritis-friendly practices are practical for everyone.

- Use a low stool to reduce the need to bend.
- If your coordination is good, find a stool with large wheels so that you can move more easily around your garden.
- Pad the handles of your hand tools with foam to enlarge the grip.
- Make sure your tools are sharp. They're much easier to use.
- Use landscape fabric to cut down on the amount of weeding.
- Use long-handled tools where possible. The handle should be as long as your own height.
- Add a handle halfway down a long-handled tool for leverage.

Watering

There are many practical, inexpensive watering devices available.

- Cut down on watering where possible—use mulch.
- Use soaker hoses and leave them in place.
- Set up a sprinkler and leave it in place. Use a timing device to turn it on and off.
- Use rain barrel and scoop for small areas and pots. They can be decorative as well as practical.
- If your hose outlets aren't within easy reach, leave the hose attached.

- Use perforated roofing gutters to water several plants at one time.
- Plastic water wands let you reach without bending or reaching, so you can water and fertilize without strain.
- Make sure your watering can is a good design for two-handed use.
- Use a “red wagon” to move your watering can from place to place.
- Buy plant pots that have a reservoir attached.

Harvesting

Nothing is more satisfying than reaping the fruits of your labour.

- Use long-handled reachers. Barbeque tools are a great help to reach fruits and vegetables.
- Use clippers that cut and hold the flower or vegetable.
- Tie a bag or can around your waist to carry the load as you walk, or use an apron with a large pocket.
- Use a two-wheeled cart or wheelbarrow to reduce the stress on your back and arms.
- Use clothes pins instead of twist ties. They're easier to manipulate.

Clean up, Don't Trip up

Take the time to clean up your tools and garden debris. It will help you avoid injury.

- Wear a multi-pocket apron for string, ties and clippers. But make sure all the weight is not on your neck.