

Healthy Gardening Tips!

Did you know that 30 minutes of gardening gives general health benefits similar to going for a brisk walk?

As physiotherapists, we understand that there are ways to stretch, move properly, pace yourself, use appropriate equipment and care for any injuries as you would for any other activity.

Healthy Gardening Tips:

1. **Stretch – Before, during, and after activity**

- Before you stretch or do any activity, ‘warm-up’ your muscles first with a nice light warm-up. For example, you can start by walking around your yard to determine a plan for your gardening; march on the spot; or try some easy raking to raise your heart rate and warm up your muscles. As you collect your tools together, give your major muscle groups a good stretch.
- During your activities, take a stretch break every half-hour. If you’ve been kneeling, stand up, walk around and admire your work. If you’ve been pruning the hedge, why not change and plant some bulbs. To minimize strain on a particular set of muscles it’s best to rotate jobs, change your position or task frequently. Think of your gardening as cross-training.
- After your activities, ‘cool down’ your muscles well. At the end of your day, as you put your tools away, give your body the stretches it needs. Walk around your yard or your neighbourhood and admire the gardens as they come to life.

2. **Be aware of your posture and body mechanics to help minimize the strain on your body.**

- When RAKING OR HOEING – keep your tools close to your body so you do not bend your back. Use long-handled tools suited to your height. Use your arms, and do not twist.
- When WEEDING OR PLANTING – do not bend right over from the waist. Squat or kneel on a kneeling pad. If you have difficulty getting up, use a kneeling pad/bench with a support handle to assist you in getting up.
- When DIGGING OR SHOVELLING – insert the head of the shovel vertically into the ground and step on the blade. Lift small amounts at a time. Keep knees bent and don’t twist. Use a wheelbarrow to move big or heavy loads.
- When LIFTING OR CARRYING – know your limits and lift properly: bend your knees, not your back. Keep the load close to your body. Don’t lift items that are too heavy for you to handle – get help! Use a garden cart or a wheelbarrow when possible to move or carry heavy items.
- When PRUNING or TRIMMING – get as close to your work as possible. Don’t stretch beyond your reach or your stable footing. Rehearse the movement as a stretch first to test your ability and positioning. Keep your tools sharp to make the job easier.

3. **Pace yourself, rotate tasks, take frequent breaks.**

Start out slowly and pace yourself. Remember you haven't been in the garden or doing yard work since the fall. Don't try to plant everything in one day! Plan out your tasks. Take frequent stretch breaks (every half-hour). Change positions and tasks frequently. If you were pruning, now try planting. If you have spent a half-hour planting, try raking or shovelling for a half-hour. If a position is causing problems or stiffness, move out of it.

4. Reduce Strain

Use tools that work for you. It's better to fit the tool to the gardener, than the gardener to the tool. Use ergonomically-correct tools, where possible.

- If you tend to bend over and reach too far while raking, you may consider using one of the ergonomic rakes designed to eliminate that tendency.
- You can give your back, legs and knees a break from stooping and kneeling if you use tools with long handles to help with the weeding.
- It's better to squat or sit on the ground to trowel rather than bending over. You may find it helpful to kneel using padding for the knees to avoid excessive and prolonged pressure.
- You can give your back a break from shovelling if you use a smaller shovel reducing the temptation to lift large, heavy shovel-fulls.
- Choose a shovel with a weight and handle length that is appropriate for your size and for the job you are doing.
- You may find that a four-wheeled cart is sturdier and easier for you to use than a wheelbarrow.
- Choose pruning and trimming tools with a weight and handle length that is appropriate for your size and for the job you are doing.