

HOME AND GARDEN

## What you should know about continuing to garden as age or mobility issues creep up

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Those who garden know the task can be arduous.

You bend and dig, and then you lift and haul.

The result is likely to be a beautiful garden, but it might be at the expense of your back, your knees, your elbows, or your hands.

When you're young, you can often shake off these aches and pains easily. But as you age, they can be more serious and can even result in the inability to continue to garden.

Aging gardeners and those with mobility issues might need to take a different approach, experts say.



Long-handled gardening tools can help maintain a straighter posture, as shown by Stephanie Wahlen. *Courtesy Of UW Extension*

“Gardeners who are older typically don’t want to give up on gardening. They want to continue gardening even though it might be painful. They love gardening and want to continue no matter what,” said Ann Loper, a University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension master gardener, and chair of the Lifelong Gardening Project,

which is a Master Gardener project for Extension volunteers in Milwaukee and Waukesha counties.

“I do think gardeners may have aches and pains, but the joy gardening brings to them makes them push through the pain and find ways to adapt,” said local garden expert Melinda Myers.

Research has shown gardening benefits the mind and body, so it's good to continue, she added. The Arthritis Foundation even recommends gardening to help with arthritis, she said.

## **Prepare and garden smart**

To continue gardening, seniors need to stretch and warm up before working, plant the right plants, use the right tools, use good body mechanics, garden in raised or elevated beds, and wear the right gear.

For stretches, Loper suggests pulling arms across the body one at a time, stretching arms over the head, doing side bends with arms up over the head, turning the neck from left to right and stretching hamstrings and quads.

Plant selection is important as it cuts down on your workload, she said.

“Make sure you’re not using plants that are invasive. That would mean you would have to be digging them up a lot and consistently maintaining them,” she said.

Native plants don’t need as much care.

“If you have a drought, they won’t die if you aren’t able to water them regularly. Natives don’t require daily watering.”

Gardeners should also match plants to the area they plant them in, she added.

“You don’t want to put something that needs a lot of water next to something that is drought tolerant. Then you’re watering something that doesn’t need to be watered, and because of the differences some of the plants could die and then you have to replace them,” she said.

When you water, do a deep watering once a week rather than light watering daily.

“You are really only supposed to water 1 inch a week. One good watering during the week is better than a little each day. The long soaking gets down to the root and stays there.”

Groundcovers and mulches are good choices, too. as they help reduce weeding and shrubs are a plus, as they require less maintenance, she said. Some shrubs don't even need to be trimmed.

## **Pick the right tools**

The right tools also make a difference, and there are lots of options.

Seniors should look for lightweight tools that are ergonomically correct, Loper said. Some good choices can be found on her group's website, [fyi.extension.wisc.edu/sewmg/life-long-gardening/](http://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/sewmg/life-long-gardening/).

The group's mission is to educate the public on principles and methods that help gardeners enjoy gardening throughout their lives. It won an award at the 2017 International Master Gardener Conference in part for creating the website to help others start their own Lifelong Gardening Projects.

“When looking for tools, make sure they are light enough. There are a lot of aluminum tools out there. And for pruners, always try them out. If they don't fit your hand properly, it's going to put stress on your hands and joints. Take them out of the package and try them if you can,” Loper said.

You can also modify or make your own tools; the website explains how.

“Say you have a favorite tool. You can put some PVC piping on it to make the angle better on your hand,” Loper said.

PVC piping works well for seeding.

“You can also make a seeder from a long piece of 1-inch PVC pipe. You can drop the seed down from the top of the tube so you don't have to bend over. Once the seeds are in, you can just step on the area to bury the seeds,” she said.

## Maintain proper posture

Correct body mechanics is one of the most important guidelines to follow for seniors.

Maintain a broad base of support, bend with the hips and knees, get close to the objects you are working on, use your large muscles because they're stronger, carry heavy objects close to your body, avoid twisting when you work, and avoid being in a bent position for long periods of time, Loper said.

Changing positions is also key.

“You don't want to weed for four hours. Maybe do it for 30 minutes, then do some deadheading or digging for 30 minutes so you are always changing your body mechanics and you're not in the same position for long periods of time,” she said.

Seniors should also push rather than pull.

“When you push a wheelbarrow, it's centered to your body. If you are pulling, you are pulling with one arm and your back could twist.”

A section on the group's website even shows how to rake correctly, calling the movement “Dancing With the Rake.”

“Keeping your feet parallel to each other, rock back and forth between each foot, keeping your back upright while you rake, versus keeping your feet planted on the ground and reaching out in front of you, which means you will be bending from your back and you will be putting stress on it,” she said.



Stephanie Wahlen pushes a wheelbarrow, which is more ergonomically correct than pulling.

*Courtesy Of UW Extension*

Myers said senior gardeners and those with mobility issues should consider planting in raised or elevated beds, and in pots. Also, adding benches helps.

“Raised or elevated beds do make it easier on your knees and your back. I do have a few raised beds, but the downside is that they do dry out quicker. And containers are a good option as you can grow so much in them and they’re a lot easier to maintain.

“I also put more benches in my garden because the space is big and I thought it would entice me to take breaks and sit down,” she said.

Also, she suggested, wear gloves and boots and kneel on pads.

“I love touching the soil, but I wear gloves because they protect my hands and I can garden longer. I also wear boots when I garden, not tennis shoes. I wear supportive boots. For me, that’s an important thing because it helps with my balance. It’s important especially if you’re walking in a garden on uneven ground,” she said.

Kneeling pads, or kneeling benches, are good, even for those who don’t have bad knees, she said.

“You will be able to work longer. ... I have all kinds of kneeling pads. Right now, I’m using gel-filled pads you can strap on. When I had my knees replaced 12 years ago, I also looked for a kneeler bench,” she said.

Myers, at 63, said she also takes smaller loads these days.

“When you get older, you have to make more trips than when you are younger and stronger,” she said.

These guidelines aren’t just for senior gardeners, Myers said.

“I always tell those that are younger in my audience about getting tools that are ergonomic, to wear gloves to protect their hands and to keep them warm, and how to bend correctly. When you’re younger, you think you’re invincible. ... but when you get older, it takes a lot longer for the Advil to kick in,” she said.

Loper said her group also focuses on the younger set.

“We teach them to use these tools to save their bodies from being in pain later on,” she said.



## 'I like to get my hands in the dirt'

Older gardeners should also ask for help in their gardens, Myers said.

“I ask for help mainly from a time standpoint. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with hiring someone for jobs you don’t like or are too heavy or difficult for you to do. Then you can save your energy to focus on what brings you joy.

“I’ve hired someone who helps me weed. I have 11 acres, and last year I added all these gardens during COVID when everything was canceled.”



Chairs or benches in the garden can minimize stress on the back and knees. Stephanie Wahlen, formerly with the Lifelong Gardening project, demonstrates. *Courtesy of UW Extension*

Jerry Schaefer of Muskego is the man she hired. He said he will be 80 next year and that he has been gardening for about 40 years.

He said he’s been working at Myers' home in Mukwonago for about the past five years, but that he also takes care of the gardens at his Muskego home.

“I work for Melinda about four days a week for about five hours a day. I do a little bit of everything, but I do work mostly on my knees,” he said.

When he works there he carries two 5-gallon buckets to put weeds in.

“I also have a golf cart with a trailer on it to throw the weeds in, so I never have to lift anything that far. I don’t have to get up and down, so it’s easier on the knees.

“Before I start to work, I do squats to limber up, because once I get to work I could be on my knees for four to five hours other than taking breaks. When you garden it

pays to have good knee pads,” he said, and added that he also walks about three days a week to keep limber and help his breathing.

“I had a heart attack two years ago, so I have artery problems. So I have quite a few stents in my legs to help blood flow. So gardening is good for my health. Getting out of the house and communicating with other gardeners is also important. When you retire, you have to have something to replace that work time, and for me that’s gardening.”

Schaefer, who said gardening has been a “serious hobby” of his for many years, said once he’s done working, he usually goes home and works in his own yard, which has about six flower beds. He is retired from work in banking, real estate and car sales.

Seniors who garden should make sure they have good quality tools and should keep their tools in good shape, he said

“The more expensive tools work the best, and they’re easier to use as we get older, especially pruners. Cheap equipment is harder to operate when we’re older because of arthritis in our hands,” he said.

He said he loves gardening and hopes he never has to give it up.

“If I couldn’t garden, it would be hard on me. Everybody has their way of relaxing. Some people like to play piano, some like to sing, and I like to get my hands in the dirt. ... Gardening keeps me young in mind and body,” he said.



Using quality tools eases stress on the hands, which is valuable for those with arthritis. *Courtesy Of UW Extension*



Elevated gardens can be especially valuable for those who have trouble bending. These were created by Joe Zompa (center) and other volunteer for St. Coletta Intergenerational Care Center in Brookfield. *Courtesy of Mary Ann Zompa*

## 'I can get a lot done in an hour'

Loper, who is 63, said she has back problems and arthritis, so she gardens for only an hour a day at her Bay View home. But she has been gardening for more than 50 years.

“I can get a lot done in an hour, but I keep in mind that if I don’t get something done, it will be there the next day.

“I have four elevated gardens, so I don’t have to get down on the ground. Elevated gardens are different from raised beds. They’re higher. I added them in the last five years. One fall, I was harvesting carrots on my hands and knees and I thought, 'Why am I doing this?' It’s one of the best things I’ve ever done,” she said.

She also carries her tools with her to make gardening easier.



“I have a little red wagon I carry my tools in. You want to make sure you have everything at once so you don’t have to walk back and forth and back and forth,” she said.

She added that a woman she knows has a 4-acre yard and keeps pruners and other garden tools in mailboxes set throughout the property so she has easy access to them.

Gardeners should also carry water and a cellphone, Loper said.

“It’s important to stay hydrated. Once you discover you are really thirsty, you are already dehydrated,” she said, and added that in addition to having her phone on hand for emergencies, she also uses it to see how many steps she’s taken while gardening.

Myers said when she gardens she often sits on her backside instead of kneeling, as it’s easier on her knees.

“When I had my knee problems I had to change my positions, so now I sit on my backside and weed. Changing positions is something we should do whether we are young or old,” she said.

She added that gardeners are a creative bunch and that they can often find ways to adapt at any age.

“When my dad was in a wheelchair in Ohio, we put pots along the ramp so he could reach them so he could still garden. It brought him so much joy,” she said.

## **Finding ways to adapt**

While some gardeners do follow guidelines for seniors, others figure out what works best for their bodies and use those techniques.

Patty Witt of New Berlin, a Master Gardener volunteer at age 73, said she crawls on her hands and knees to tend her half-acre, English cottage-style garden.

“I had back surgery four years ago, but my knees are great, so I take two 5-gallon pails and I crawl around on my hands and knees until they get full, and then I use the pails to get up,” she said.

But she does limit her time in the yard.

“When I was in my 40s or 50s, I could spend all day out here. Now I can’t, so I do it for a short amount of time,” she said, and added that when it’s very hot she limits her time outside even more.

To make gardening easier and faster, she uses a Hori Hori garden knife (a Japanese gardening tool similar to a trowel with a sharp, serrated edge) to dig weeds, and a short-handled CobraHead claw to dig trenches.

“I should follow the guidelines of the Lifelong Gardening Project, but it’s hard to break old habits,” she said.

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## **12 more tips for gardeners**

These are from garden experts Ann Loper and Melinda Myers.

- Make sure your tools aren’t too far out in front of you when you garden, as they will put you off balance. It also puts stress on the wrong body part.
- Wear a hat, sunglasses and sunscreen, and keep bug spray handy.
- Avoid prolonged pinching and squeezing movements, as it’s hard on hands.
- Weed after it rains or after you water, as it will be easier to dig then.
- Use long-handled tools to avoid bending.
- Use tools with smaller ends to reduce the weight.
- Use two hands to carry things when possible.
- Only use tools that fit your hands.
- Avoid plants that require staking to stay upright.
- Avoid plants that need a lot of pruning and deadheading, that go to seed or are prone to diseases.
- Avoid plants that are short lived or not cold hardy for our area.
- Get hoses that are lightweight for areas where they need to be moved around frequently.

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## For more information

**Lifelong Gardening Project:** [fyi.extension.wisc.edu/sewmg/life-long-gardening/](http://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/sewmg/life-long-gardening/)

**Arthritis Foundation:** Tips on gardening with arthritis: [blog.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/gardening-with-arthritis-preventing-joint-pain/](http://blog.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/gardening-with-arthritis-preventing-joint-pain/)

**Arthritis Foundation:** Tips on tools and ways to make gardening easier: [blog.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/helpful-garden-tools/](http://blog.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/helpful-garden-tools/)

**Carry on Gardening:** Information on gardening after a stroke and with heart disease, gardening sitting down and from a wheelchair, gardening with a weak grip, with one hand, for blind or partially sighted people, and to improve emotional well-being: [carryongardening.org.uk](http://carryongardening.org.uk)