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Your health might impact your ability to garden

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This is the time of year when the birth of spring inspires us to get out there and garden. You are another year older and wiser.

But have you assessed your gardening abilities lately?

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Individuals with orthopedic, neck and back limitations, can garden safely with waist-high planters
- Your health might impact your ability to garden

If you have ever worked with a personal trainer, joined a gym or had a physical then it is likely you have had an assessment of your health and where if any changes or improvements could be made in order to improve the quality of your life. Have you ever considered how your current state of health might impact your ability to garden? If you have experienced a temporary or permanent change to your health, I encourage you to read on.

There are three considerations for you to look at in your simple assessment:

The first is time. How much time you have available to garden and the time any task will take you will affect every decision you make. Your time, no doubt, is limited and as a result you probably rush, grab any tool, lift, drag, shovel, scoop, rototill, plant, bend and lift and push and pull repeatedly just to get the gardening job done. Your first consideration is to think about how you can maximize your time, without risking your health.

The second consideration is mobility. Are you free to move about in any space, having ease to access and navigate in and around safely? Can you stand, walk, reach, carry, tow, lift, push and pull freely? Do you have a new or reoccurring limitation like knee, back, hip,

shoulder, hip problems, arthritis, a broken limb, or are you in a wheelchair, or using a walker? Are you recovering from a recent operation, undergoing treatment for illness? Are you on medications that limit your sun exposure? A frank reality check will tell you what you can and more likely, what you can't do. If you have mobility restrictions, you may consider having a raised garden, waist high, on wheels so it is portable. You may consider having a garden closer to your residence so your energy isn't used getting to and from your garden.

Individuals with orthopedic, neck and back limitations, for example, can garden safely by staging large, waist-high planters. A lightweight cart with wheels can be used for transportation and placement of materials. Planting can be done from a comfortable standing or seated position. The height of the containers also can serve as a place to take frequent rests. Consider a lightweight, cushioned portable stool, or bench on which to sit to finish the planting, and a lightweight watering can and hose for ease of handling and carrying. Many tools are now available that are interchangeable, adjustable, and have wide grips. Soft handles can also be created by adding a piece of foam.

The third consideration is ability. Determining your ability will help you make judgements about basic garden components and types of equipment. Ability factors will help you determine what type of gardening is practical. Traditional, ground-level gardening may be working just fine for you now, but your ability to do this will not last forever.

By the numbers

Here are some considerations for you to keep in mind to maximize safety while gardening:

- 1.** Can you get down on the floor or ground and get back up without assistance? If all you need are knee pads, consider yourself fortunate. Chances are, however, that if you tried gardening from a comfortable standing position using lightweight, long-handled, and wide-grip, soft-handled tools, you most likely will find it easier and far less taxing.
- 2.** Do you have any back problems, or limited balance or coordination? Do you rely on a cane to get around but are still able to walk long distances, or stand for a long period of time? Level surfaces become more important. If you cannot walk long distances either with or without adaptive devices, then you may want to consider keeping frequently visited garden areas that need more attention closer to your dwelling. Include a place to sit and be comfortable.

3. Can you stand on one foot, or is it challenging? How are you at walking up steps or inclines? If you use crutches, cane or walker, the ability to carry things becomes more important. Equipment to help you carry tools and plants becomes a consideration. How are you going to carry and maneuver hose, or watering can? You will need to adapt.

4. Ask yourself how long can you comfortably stand on your own. If you are more comfortable seated, there are many adaptive tools and methods to bring your garden to you. Here are some considerations on how to make this possible. Seating should be positioned at intervals throughout and around the garden. Use vertical techniques. Use adaptive tools that help you reach while standing for a short period of time.

If you have increased weakness in your arms, or hands from arthritis, or stroke, for example, gloves and padded tools are good. Gripping aides, wrist supports and smaller lightweight tools are great adaptive supplements to heavy, long handled traditional tools.

5. Visual impairment affects every aspect of gardening. Safe unobstructed flat surfaces are essential to prevent tripping hazards. Tools with bright-colored handles are better considerations than dark color tools. Use plants and plant combinations with bright dramatic colors, form and textural contrast.

We all have similarities and differences in our abilities and limitations in the garden and in our gardening positions. There are many ways to compensate for limitations, but understanding the three basic considerations as discussed will make it possible for adapting and modifying design space, tasks, tools and equipment.

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