

Gardening for seniors

Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits for older people, especially when you create an edible garden. Garden beds, equipment and tools can all be modified to create a garden that is interesting, accessible and productive.

Some medical conditions and physical disabilities may restrict or prevent older people from participating in gardening. However with planning and a few changes, you can create a safe, accessible, and pleasant space.

Gardening keeps you fit and healthy

Everyone can benefit from creating an edible garden. Seniors can get particular benefits because gardening:

- Is an enjoyable form of exercise.
- Increases levels of physical activity and maintains mobility and flexibility.
- Encourages use of all motor skills – walking, reaching and bending – through activities such as planting seeds and taking cuttings.
- Improves endurance and strength.
- Helps prevent diseases like osteoporosis.
- Reduces stress levels and promotes relaxation.
- Provides stimulation and interest in nature and the outdoors.
- Improves wellbeing as a result of social interaction.
- Provides nutritious, home-grown produce.

Physical and mental considerations in the garden

Some physical, mental and age-related conditions must be considered when older people work in the garden. These include:

- **Skin** – fragile, thinning skin makes the elderly susceptible to bumps, bruises and sunburn.
- **Vision** – changes in the eye lens structure, loss of peripheral vision and generally poorer eyesight can restrict activities.
- **Mental abilities** – mental health, thinking and memory abilities may be affected by dementia and similar conditions.
- **Body temperature** – susceptibility to temperature changes and tendency to dehydrate or suffer from heat exhaustion are common concerns with outdoor physical activity for older people.
- **Skeletal** – falls are more common because balance is often not as good. Osteoporosis and arthritis may restrict movement and flexibility.

Changes to equipment, tools and the garden

Garden spaces, tools and equipment can be modified or adapted to help reduce the physical stress associated with gardening. Suggestions include:

- Use vertical planting to make garden beds accessible for planting and harvesting – try using wall and trellis spaces.
- Raise beds to enable people with physical restrictions to avoid bending and stooping.
- Provide retractable hanging baskets, wheelbarrows and containers on castors to make suitable movable and elevated garden beds.
- Find adaptive tools and equipment – these are available from some hardware shops.

- Use foam, tape and plastic tubing to modify existing tools.
- Use lightweight tools that are easier to handle.
- Provide shade areas for working in summer months.
- Have stable chairs and tables to use for comfortable gardening.
- Ensure that there is a tap nearby or consider installing a drip feeder system for easy watering.
- Make sure the toilet is nearby.

Safety in the garden for older people

Here are a few safety tips that older people and their carers should follow.

- Attend to any cuts, bruises or insect bites immediately.
- Take care in the use of power tools.
- Secure gates and fences if memory loss is an issue.
- Ensure that paths and walkways are flat and non-slip.
- Warm up before gardening and encourage frequent breaks.
- Prevent sun exposure by working in the garden early in the morning or late in the day. Wear a hat and apply sunscreen frequently.
- Drink water or juice, and avoid alcohol.
- Wear protective shoes, lightweight comfortable clothes that cover exposed skin, a hat and gardening gloves.
- Store garden equipment safely.

Legionnaire's disease and gardening

Legionnaire's disease is sometimes linked to handling potting mixes. Always follow these safety rules:

- Wear a facemask and gloves.
- Do not lean over an open bag of potting mix. This avoids the risk of breathing in spores.
- Moisten contents of potting mix bags when you open them.
- Wash hands with soap and water after handling soil.

Plant selection

An edible garden is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and other plants that you can eat. You should also consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities. Sensory plants include those that have special smell, taste, touch and sight qualities.

Gardening activities for older people

There are many activities associated with cultivating an edible garden that seniors may enjoy. These include:

- Digging
- Planting
- Watering
- Harvesting food and flowers
- Crafts and hobbies associated with plants
- Food preparation.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- Local council
- Cultivating Community Tel. (03) 9429 3084
- Occupational Therapists Victoria Tel. (03) 9481 6866
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria Tel. (03) 9836 1128.

Things to remember

- Gardening is a healthy, stimulating physical activity that can be enjoyed by seniors.
- The garden, equipment and tools can all be modified to suit the needs of older people.
- Make sure your edible garden is a safe and accessible space.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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