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## Gardening for older people

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### Summary

- Gardening is a healthy, stimulating physical activity that can be enjoyed by older people.
  - The garden, equipment and tools can all be modified to suit the needs of older people.
  - Gardening increases levels of physical activity, and maintains mobility and flexibility.
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Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits for older people, especially edible gardening. 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.

### Benefits of gardening for older people

Gardening is beneficial for older people because it:

- is an enjoyable form of exercise
- increases levels of physical activity and helps mobility and flexibility
- encourages use of all motor skills
- 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
- can provide nutritious, home-grown produce.

### Health considerations in the garden

Some physical, mental and age-related conditions must be considered when older people work in the garden, but they should not prevent people from enjoying the garden. These include:

- skin – fragile, thinning skin makes older people 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 a 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.

### Adjustments to equipment and the garden for older people

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

- using vertical planting to make garden beds accessible for planting and harvesting – try using wall and trellis spaces
- raising beds to enable people with physical restrictions to avoid bending and stooping
- using retractable hanging baskets, wheelbarrows and containers on castors to make suitable movable and elevated garden beds
- finding adaptive tools and equipment – these are available from some hardware shops
- using foam, tape and plastic tubing to modify existing tools for a better grip
- using lightweight tools that are easier to handle
- providing shade areas for working in summer months
- having stable chairs and tables to use for comfortable gardening
- making sure that there is a tap nearby or consider installing a drip feeder system for easy watering.

### **Safety in the garden for older people**

Safety tips that older people (and their carers) should follow include:

- 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.

### **Gardening activities for older people**

There are many activities associated with cultivating a garden that older people may enjoy. These include:

- digging
- planting
- watering
- harvesting food and flowers
- sensory enjoyment – smelling, touching, looking, listening, remembering
- 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 Therapy Australia**, Victoria Division Tel. (03) 9481 6866

- **Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria** Tel.1800 682 878

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

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