
Gardening for older people

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

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. (03) 9836 1128.

Things to remember

- 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.

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

Horticultural Therapy Association Vic.

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