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.

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.

References

- Take it easy – tips to make the work easier, Garden Forever. More information here.
Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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More information

Environmental health

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Environmental health basics
- House and garden
- Chemical and metal pollutants
- Air and water quality
- Food quality and safety
- Technology and man-made risks
- Bushfires, floods and extreme weather
- Climate change
- Public health and disease control

Environmental health basics
• After a flood – animal and insect related hazards
When returning to a flood-affected area, remember that wild animals, including rats, mice, snakes or spiders, may be trapped in your home, shed or garden.

• After a flood – returning home safely
When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of injury, illness or disease.

• Allergies explained
Allergy occurs when the body overreacts to a 'trigger' that is harmless to most people.

• Disease clusters
Disease clusters are rare but can cause community concern about the possible effects of exposure to environmental hazards.

• Emergencies - floods
You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood.

• Food safety and storage
High-risk food should be kept at 5 °C or below, and above 60 °C to avoid the temperature danger zone and food poisoning.

• Hazardous waste
It can be dangerous to dispose of hazardous wastes through regular rubbish collections.

• Smoke and your health - science summary (video)

• Smoke and your health (video)

House and garden

• Asbestos and your health
When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs.

• Asbestos in the home
Asbestos fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including lung cancer and mesothelioma.

• Bedbugs
Bedbugs have highly developed mouth parts that can pierce skin.

• Edible gardens - saving water
Saving water in the garden not only saves money, but also helps protect the environment.

• Gardening safety
Gardening is an enjoyable form of exercise, but you need to take care.

• Gas heating - health and safety issues
If you service your gas heater regularly and use it correctly, it will be safe and economical to use.

• Greywater - recycling water at home
When handled properly, greywater can be safely reused for the garden.

• Hazardous waste
It can be dangerous to dispose of hazardous wastes through regular rubbish collections.

• Mosquitoes - protect your home a checklist
Use this simple checklist and take action to prevent mosquitoes from entering your home. The best protection from mosquito-borne diseases is to avoid mosquito bites.

• Mould and your health
The way to control indoor mould growth is to control the source of moisture.

• Passive smoking
Passive smoking means breathing other people's second-hand tobacco smoke. Passive smoking increases the risk of serious illness in both children and adults.

• Pest control in the home
If you use pesticides to control pests around the house, make sure you use as little as possible.

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• Pest control services
  If you have pest problems that you cannot manage yourself, you may need to hire an authorised pest control operator.

• Sewage overflows at home
  Sewage contains harmful microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses and protozoa.

• Wood fires and breathing problems
  The smoke from wood fires can affect air quality and may affect people’s health.

Chemical and metal pollutants

• Hazardous waste
  It can be dangerous to dispose of hazardous wastes through regular rubbish collections.

• Arsenic mine tailings and health
  Mine tailings near goldmines may contain high levels of arsenic.

• Cadmium
  Low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body.

• Chemicals and spray drift
  Sprayed chemicals can drift over neighbouring properties or water sources, and can affect human health, animals or the environment.

• Copper chrome arsenic (CCA) treated timber
  CCA treated timber should not be used to build children’s play equipment, patios, new garden furniture, decking or handrails.

• Farm safety and handling agrichemicals
  To reduce risks on the farm, use hazardous chemicals according to manufacturer guidelines or replace them with less dangerous options.

• Lead exposure and your health
  Long-term exposure to low levels of lead may produce symptoms including irritability, lack of energy and loss of appetite.

• Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

• Mercury exposure and poisoning
  Preventing or minimising exposure to mercury in your environment is the best way to reduce the risk of mercury poisoning.

• Mercury in fish
  Pregnant women and young children should limit consumption of fish that contain high levels of mercury.

• Pest control in the home
  If you use pesticides to control pests around the house, make sure you use as little as possible.

• Pest control services
  If you have pest problems that you cannot manage yourself, you may need to hire an authorised pest control operator.

Air and water quality

• Beaches and water quality
  Water quality of natural water sources, such as beaches and rivers, can vary greatly. Keeping a lookout for poor water quality (such as water that is discoloured, murky or smells unpleasant) will help.

• Cleaning up ash after a fire
  After a fire, many homes may be affected by ash residue from smoke. This ash can be harmful, particularly for children or people with heart or lung conditions. This factsheet has tips and advice for.

• Dental care - fluoride
  Fluoride in your drinking water is like a constant ‘repair kit’ for your teeth.

• Greywater - recycling water at home

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When handled properly, greywater can be safely reused for the garden.

- **Harmful algal blooms**
  Some types of blue-green algae produce toxins that can harm humans and animals when swallowed, inhaled or touched. People and pets should not enter the water at locations affected by blue-green algae.

- **Healthy swimming (video)**
  We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun.

- **Legionnaires’ disease**
  Legionnaires’ disease is a rare form of pneumonia.

- **Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)**
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

- **Passive smoking**
  Passive smoking means breathing other people’s second-hand tobacco smoke. Passive smoking increases the risk of serious illness in both children and adults.

- **Smoke and your health - protect your health (video)**
  Smoke and your health - science summary (video)

- **Swimming - keeping the water clean**
  There are simple steps for all visitors to follow to keep pool water clean for healthy swimming.

- **Water from natural resources**
  Drinking untreated water, such as creek water, bore water and sometimes even rainwater can lead to illnesses including gastroenteritis.

- **Water quality in tanks, bores and dams**
  Make sure your private drinking water supply is safe.

- **Wood fires and breathing problems**
  The smoke from wood fires can affect air quality and may affect people’s health.

### Food quality and safety

- **Avoid food poisoning - Cook Safe (video)**
  Learn how to prepare and cook food safely at home.

- **Avoid food poisoning - Store Safe (video)**
  Learn how to store food safely in your fridge at home.

- **Eggs**
  The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals (such as vitamin A, vitamin D).

- **Fishing - eat your catch with care**
  People who fish in the Lower Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers need to be careful about eating their catch because of the risk of chemical exposure.

- **Food allergy and intolerance**
  Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction.

- **Food - pesticides and other chemicals**
  Chemicals such as pesticides, antibiotics and hormones are used to boost food production and ensure adequate food supply.

- **Food poisoning - prevention**
  You can minimise the risk of food poisoning by taking simple precautions.

- **Food safety and storage**
  High-risk food should be kept at 5 °C or below, and above 60 °C to avoid the temperature danger zone and food poisoning.

- **Travel health and safety tips (slideshow)**
  We all love travelling to new and exotic places, but unfortunately illnesses and unforeseen events can ruin the trip of a lifetime. With a little effort, take a few of
Technology and man-made risks

- **Asbestos and your health**
  When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs.

- **Cancer and asbestos**
  Long-term exposure to asbestos is a cause of lung cancer and other serious illnesses.

- **Electromagnetic fields (EMF) and health issues**
  The effect of electromagnetic fields (EMF) from power lines and other sources is a controversial issue.

- **Legionnaires' disease**
  Legionnaires' disease is a rare form of pneumonia.

- **Mobile phones and your health**
  Using a mobile phone while driving greatly increases the risk of traffic accidents.

Bushfires, floods and extreme weather

- **After a flood – animal and insect related hazards**
  When returning to a flood-affected area, remember that wild animals, including rats, mice, snakes or spiders, may be trapped in your home, shed or garden.

- **After a flood – returning home safely**
  When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of injury, illness or disease.

- **Bushfire aftermath - safety tips**
  Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards.

- **Bushfire preparation advice**
  Being prepared for a bushfire helps you cope better in an emergency.

- **Bushfires and water tanks**
  Debris, smoke, ash and dead animals from a bushfire can contaminate water tanks.

- **Bushfire smoke**
  Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health.

- **Cleaning up ash after a fire**
  After a fire, many homes may be affected by ash residue from smoke. This ash can be harmful, particularly for children or people with heart or lung conditions. This factsheet has tips and advice for.

- **Emergencies - floods**
  You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood.

- **Extreme heat (video)**
  Extreme heat can affect anyone, including the young and healthy.

- **Heat stress and heat-related illness**
  Heat kills more Australians than any natural disaster. Find out how you can treat and prevent heat-related illness.

- **How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat**
  Know the effects of extreme heat, who is at risk and how you can prepare yourself and others.

- **Mould and your health**
  The way to control indoor mould growth is to control the source of moisture.

- **Sewage overflows at home**
  Sewage contains harmful microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses and protozoa.

- **Smoke from planned burns**
  Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of...
bushfires.

- Survive the heat
  How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat.

Climate change

- Beaches and water quality
  Water quality of natural water sources, such as beaches and rivers, can vary greatly. Keeping a lookout for poor water quality (such as water that is discoloured, murky or smells unpleasant) will help.

- Climate change and health
  The effects of climate change will have a serious impact on the physical and mental health of people around the world.

- Climate change - what you can do
  There are many things you can do to tackle climate change and live a more sustainable lifestyle.

- Edible gardens - saving water
  Saving water in the garden not only saves money, but also helps protect the environment.

- Urban flash floods - FAQs
  Urban flash flooding can happen quickly and without warning. Heavy rain causes runoff to collect in dips, car parks and roads, and there is a risk of contamination, injury and disease.

Public health and disease control

- Disease clusters
  Disease clusters are rare but can cause community concern about the possible effects of exposure to environmental hazards.

- Harmful algal blooms
  Some types of blue-green algae produce toxins that can harm humans and animals when swallowed, inhaled or touched. People and pets should not enter the water at locations affected by blue-green algae.

- Healthy swimming (video)
  We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun.

- Mosquitoes can carry diseases
  You can reduce the risk of mosquito bites if you get rid of potential mosquito breeding sites around your home.

- Mosquitoes - mozzie-proof your holiday a checklist
  Use this simple checklist and take action to prevent mosquitoes from spoiling your holiday. Mosquitoes can carry diseases be prepared and avoid mosquito bites.

- Mosquitoes - protect your home a checklist
  Use this simple checklist and take action to prevent mosquitoes from entering your home. The best protection from mosquito-borne diseases is to avoid mosquito bites.

- Needlestick injury
  A needlestick injury means the skin is accidentally punctured by a used needle. Diseases that could be transmitted by a needle or needlestick injury include human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

- Travel health and safety tips (slideshow)
  We all love travelling to new and exotic places, but unfortunately illnesses and unforeseen events can ruin the trip of a lifetime. With a little effort, take a few of these simple precautions to make...

Related Information

- Older people in hospital – Get well soon
  Learn about improving and maintaining your health during a hospital stay.

- Gardening for health - starting out
  Gardening is a healthy activity that can be enjoyed by everyone.

- Gardening safety

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Gardening is an enjoyable form of exercise, but you need to take care...

- **Gardening for children**
  Children can learn new skills, have fun and develop self-confidence when they grow their own plants...

- **Gardens for all – a health activity**
  Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits, and is an activity that most people can enjoy...

**Related information on other websites**

- [Australian Government - Seniors.gov.au website](#)
- [Occupational Therapy Australia](#)

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