Gardening - people with disabilities

Summary

- Gardening is a healthy, stimulating activity that can be enjoyed by people of all abilities.
- Gardening equipment and tools can be modified to suit people with disabilities.
- Your garden can be landscaped so that garden beds are easily accessible and safe.

Gardening can have many health benefits for people with disabilities, and can provide a source of exercise, friendship, stimulation and relaxation. With a little planning and consideration, you can create an accessible, productive and pleasant garden for people with disabilities.

Equipment and garden structures need to be carefully designed and selected to accommodate people with disabilities. Vertical gardens (which make use of walls and fences) and raised containers can help make a garden accessible to people with disabilities.

Gardening skills for people with disabilities

For people with disabilities, gardening may help to improve:

- Communication and social skills – from being involved in groups and community activities
- Fitness – gardening is a great physical activity
- Confidence – gardening helps to develop a range of new skills
- Wellbeing – gardening is a great way to relax and reduce stress levels
- Physical ability – through improved motor skills
- Nutrition – gardening provides an opportunity to learn about healthy food
- Knowledge – it’s a chance to learn about the environment and nature
- Enjoyment of life – gardening is a wonderful leisure activity where tasks and routines can be varied and shared.

Making a garden easy to use for people with disabilities

To provide easy and safe access and to accommodate people with a range of disabilities, you may need to make some modifications when planning your garden, including:

- Raise garden beds to help people with physical restrictions, and to avoid bending and stooping.
- Provide tables that are wheelchair accessible where people can do potting and planting together.
- Use pots, window boxes, wheelbarrows and raised containers to make gardening more accessible – these can also be used when space and sunlight are limited.
- Provide retractable hanging baskets that can be pulled up and down so they are within easy reach.
- Use containers with wheels, which can be moved around easily to accessible positions and to catch the sunlight.
- Keep paths smooth, non-slip, accessible and level.
- Have a water supply handy and place plants together according to their water needs.
- Have an equipment storage area or shed nearby.
- Provide shade for working in the garden in summer (remember to use hats, sunscreen and other sun protection).
• Provide ready access to toilets.

**Garden equipment for people with disabilities**

Garden equipment can be adapted in many ways to suit people with varying disabilities. Consult an occupational therapist for expert advice. Suggestions include:

- Use tape, foam padding, bicycle grips and PVC pipe to improve grip and handle length on tools.
- Find specific ergonomic (designed to reduce discomfort) and enabling tools – these are available at some hardware shops.
- Use gloves that have a sticky surface or gloves with gripper dots.
- Use of splints and supports may also be appropriate – consult an occupational therapist.
- Look for lightweight tools that are easier to handle.

**Plant selection for people with disabilities**

Consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities. Sensory plants include those that have special sound, smell, taste, touch and visual qualities.

Examples of great sensory plants include:

- **Touch** – woolly lamb’s ear, succulents (such as aloe vera), bottlebrush species, snapdragons
- **Taste** – basil, strawberries, peas, rosemary, carrots, cherry tomatoes
- **Smell** – jasmine, sweet peas, lavender, pelargoniums, native mint bush, lemon balm
- **Bright colour** – daffodils, rainbow chard, marigolds, pansies, sunflowers
- **Sound** – corn, bamboo and grasses rustle against each other when the wind blows.

**Garden activities for people with disabilities**

People with disabilities can be involved in many gardening activities, including:

- Watering
- Digging, planting and sowing
- Pruning and clipping
- Weeding and mulching
- Flower picking and arranging
- Craft activities using materials from the garden
- Harvesting garden produce
- Cooking food from the garden.

**Where to get help**

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

**Things to remember**

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- Gardening equipment and tools can be modified to suit people with disabilities.
- Your garden can be landscaped so that garden beds are easily accessible and safe.