

Physical health benefits of gardening

and how to prevent muscle strains and injuries



GUEST CORNER

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The gardening season has finally arrived. Getting back in the garden may impose a greater strain on our bodies than we may realize. Whether you are a serious vegetable gardener, attend to a few flower planters on your deck, or maintain a large yard, gardening requires minimal to strenuous exercise that includes hauling bags of soil, mowing, raking, pruning, pushing a loaded wheelbarrow, or lifting stones or wood.

Gardening can be good exercise

When you perform your gardening activities, you use all the major muscle groups in your body. This is a good exercise. Additionally, you reap the mental rewards of seeing flowers bloom, a manicured landscape and enjoying your vegetable crops.

Warming up for your day in the garden

Gardening is a physical workout. As with any exercise, you should prepare your mind and your body for the physical activity. Prepare your mind by planning out your day in advance envisioning the required physical activity and develop the postural awareness to break old habits of bending, lifting, and carrying incorrectly. Prepare your body by doing the following:

1. Take a brisk 15 -20 min walk to warm up your muscles and joints and get the circulation flowing. Be mindful to keep your ribcage up, elongate your spine up to the sky and use your muscles to propel you forward by taking longer strides and swing your arms.

2. Stand with your feet just wider than hip-width. Put your hands behind your neck. Tighten your core with knees slightly bent, twist your torso and upper body gently from side-to-side x 10 times.

3. Reach sideways up with your one arm and bend from your waist sideways. Slide with the other arm down your thigh. Repeat to both sides 10 times.

4. Stretch your hamstrings and calves by placing one leg in a straight forward with foot flexed back against a step up-riser or a tree trunk. Keep your heel on the ground and lean forward with your body, while you keep your back flat until you feel a gentle stretch behind your knee and calf. Hold for 15 seconds. Repeat five times.

5. Practice balancing on one leg with your knee slightly bent, your back flat and reaching forward with your hands and body to mimic reaching forward to prune.

Warming up for your day in the garden

When you perform your gardening activities, you use all the major muscle groups in your body. This is a good exercise. Additionally, you reap the mental rewards of seeing flowers bloom, a manicured landscape and enjoying your vegetable crops.

The following tips will help you avoid injuries:

- Use garden tools with longer handles that allow you to stay upright and use your body weight and gravity for digging, planting, raking, and watering.

- Use garden tools with thicker padding to avoid hand and wrist injuries as opposed to squeezing and holding onto a thin handle.

- Use a wheelbarrow or tarp to move things, but do not overload the wheelbarrow or tarp.

- Use a garden stool or a thick cushioned knee pad (or both) when tilling and planting.

- Use a large-handled container to carry your supplies to the garden. Carry the container with both hands in front of you, distributing the workload equally to decrease the stress in the upper body joints.

- Avoid crouching over in the same position for extended periods. Instead, alternate your body position from kneeling activities to working in the upright position.

- Avoid carrying too heavy loads; instead, make several trips with lighter loads (walking more is healthy).

- If you have a strong dominant side, frequently switch to the non-dominant side for lifting, raking, carrying to avoid repetitive overuse of the one side.

- Follow good body mechanics when bending and kneeling as well as getting back up from the ground, such as:

- When bending down, hinge from the hips and push your buttocks backwards with a straight back

- Keep your legs spread open slightly wider than hip width

- Bend your knees as if sitting back in a chair and avoid bending your knees forward over your toes

- Keep your abdominals, core and

Glutes tight

- Use your elbows/forearms on your thighs as you bend down to reduce the strain on your back

- When getting up from the ground: spread your knees open, climb your body up from the down position by pushing your forearms on your thighs then switch to your hands on your thighs until you to get to the upright position; and

- Use your stronger Glutes (buttock muscles) to assist you getting up and down, help you be more balanced and offload on strain from the lower back and knees

- Pace yourself. Start you season by gardening for 30-45 minutes twice a day, instead of two hours continuously.

- Listen to your body to STOP, change position, take a step back and hydrate.

Post-gardening body maintenance suggestions

After gardening repeat the gentle stretches described above to cool down

your body. If you overdid your fun gardening day and feel a body part screaming for help, apply heat or ice over the muscle or joint for 15 minutes and rest. If you do not feel better, please contact your physician or physical therapist.

Lize Lubbe is the owner of Lize Lubbe Physical Therapy with its main practice located at 892 Route 35 in Cross River and a PT Studio in the premises of Apex Fitness (where her team focus on the rehabilitation of sports-related injuries). Learn more by calling 914-875-9430, emailing contact@lizelubbept.com or visiting www.lizelubbept.com



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