

Stay Healthy in the Garden

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Do your part to aid recovery

Gardening eases stress, provides exercise, gets you outside and gives you a sense of accomplishment. It's something you can do at any age. But it's easy to forget common sense in getting your body ready. Although gardening is not necessarily thought of as exercise, in reality it is physical work and should be treated as such.

Think of preseason training for competitive sports. You should warm up first to get your blood circulating to your joints. A 10-minute walk is a great way to begin. Then do some stretching moves and balance poses for flexibility and stability. Take the time to slowly stretch your arms, hands, shoulders knees and back.

There are some simple exercises and some yoga positions that can help you get your body ready for a day of yard work and some postural stretches to do intermittently throughout the day to help prevent injury and remind you of proper spine biomechanics (avoiding bending and twisting at the lumbar spine, bending or "hinging" at the hips and knees).

Weeding, digging and raking can provide a great workout, but can also cause injuries if precautions are not taken.

Here are 6 tips for preventing gardening injuries, pain and stiffness the next day.

1. Loosen up first with a 10-minute walk
2. Slowly stretch your hands, shoulders, back and knees with slow repetitive movement. Longer stretches have been shown to be more beneficial in actually increasing muscle length. Avoid fast or jerky moves
3. Practice good form. Keep your lower back straight, squat and use your leg muscles to help lift things. It is important not to bend at the lower back and twist when shoveling dirt. Bending and twisting at the lumbar spine increases the load on the lumbar discs and may cause an injury. Instead move from side to side, keeping the shovel close to your body, knees slightly bent and scoop in a forward motion.
4. Wear gloves. Bacteria and fungi in the soil can cause infections if you have a cut.
5. Use padded knee protectors or a low bench when weeding. Again, keep your lower back straight and bend at the hips and knees. Get up and stretch every 5-10 minutes to prevent cramps and improve circulation.
6. Don't overdo. Take a break every 30-45 minutes. Stop if you are in pain. Rest. Your body may be telling you injury is occurring.
7. If you have mild aches and pains after gardening, use of a cold pack at the end of the session may be beneficial in reducing the inflammation, and ice acts as a natural analgesic. Ice for 10-15 minutes and you can use this repeatedly later in the evening if beneficial.



With the assistance of her dog Tula, Annie Taylor of Crescent Moon Yoga in La Conner demonstrates the down dog pose. Keep your back straight and your palms on the floor. If you cannot put your heels on the floor, bend your knees. This is a good overall starting stretch to get your body ready for a day of gardening. *Photo by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

Consult with your doctor, health specialist or a physical therapist if you have any nagging pains or other medical conditions that may hinder your ability to participate in a new exercise regimen.

There are also traumatic injuries that can cause significant harm to the body. They are usually due to improper use of power tools or falling off a ladder. More than 400,000 garden tool related injuries are treated in emergency rooms each year. A majority are from a power lawn mower or falling off a ladder. But some serious injuries have been caused by non-powered hand tools such as rakes or tripping over garden hoses.

Power tools make many tasks easier and faster. Extra caution must be taken. Using the right protective gear is the first step towards avoiding injury. Remember, "Haste makes waste," which could include your fingers or toes. Always comply with the manufacturer's instructions on proper use of the tool. Wear safety glasses because flying debris could end up in your eyes and cause permanent damage.

Always take the use of a power tool seriously. That fact that you have been using a chainsaw or power lawnmower for 2 decades without incidence doesn't mean you have become immune to it. It only takes one second of recklessness for you to make a mistake you will regret, maybe for the rest of your life. The more you work with a tool, the less threatening it seems, and therefore all the more reason to take your time. No rushing.

Many tools have a power cord which means you must pay close attention to what you are doing. Always turn off the tool before you set it down and unplug it when you are not using it. Remember, the blades and pointed tips of power tools are sharp and hazardous even when the tool is turned off. People have been electrocuted from running a lawnmower over a power cord so check for those lying in the grass.

Keep your tools in good working order. Properly maintained tools are safer to use.

Falling off a ladder can cause very serious injuries or even death, second only to lawnmower injuries in number. Make sure your ladder is sturdy and placed on level ground. Have someone close by when you are on a ladder. “One hand for the ladder and one hand for the tool” is a good motto. There are many long-handled tools now so you may not need to be on a ladder.

Gardening is fun and enjoyable. Getting hurt is not. Do your part to keep yourself healthy. This includes helping your body with simple exercises and stretches, maintaining and respecting all of your tools, making sure your tetanus vaccination is up to date, and wearing protective clothing, gloves, sturdy shoes and sunscreen. Then go outdoors! Your garden is calling.



Annie Taylor demonstrates an advanced tree pose. Yoga can help aid recovery from gardening-related injuries or fatigue. *Photo by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

RESOURCES:

- ["How to Avoid Garden Injuries."](#) Dr. Lise Jenkins
- "Living Well Today." Tracey Clayton. Nov. 2016.
- ["Ergonomics Tips for Home Gardening."](#) University of California at Berkeley

Note: some hyperlinks and references in this article have been updated since its initial publication.