

Ergonomic tools and methods

By Vivian Mizuta

October 3, 2008

Follow these tips for successful gardening in spite of physical limitations.

Just as we reach the gardening prime-time of our lives, our bodies often give us another message. Decreased strength and mobility from common diseases such as arthritis and back problems, as well as decreased energy in general, make gardening seem less appealing than it once was.

There are many ways to keep the healthful benefits of garden exercise and joy in your life. In Skagit County, we are fortunate to have a very unique and valuable resource to help us with ideas to ease gardening physically. Twelve years ago, the WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners developed a three-acre piece of farm land into twenty-five smaller themed areas and called it The Discovery Garden.

Visit this garden at 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway) west of Mount Vernon by entering the main covered gate, where you will find maps and brochures. Turn left immediately, into the patio paver area and you will discover The Enabling Garden. This garden is an ongoing demonstration of methods and beds that can give you ideas to use at home.

Along with this garden, the WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners have a team with backgrounds in occupational, physical, and horticultural therapies, as well as nursing. Combining the garden space with this knowledge and interest, we have developed a three-way approach to gardening with ease, and we enjoy talking to small groups on this topic. For more information, call the Master Gardener's Speakers Bureau at 360.336.8958.

If you love to garden, but are constrained by physical realities, here are a few tips to help you rediscover and enjoy this pastime.

Body mechanics

Know your own limits

Pace yourself by resting on a garden bench or stool while you enjoy the view. Puttering is your privilege. Hire someone to do the heavy work.

Prioritize tasks

Do the lighter tasks before the more strenuous ones. Alternate tasks within the hour so that you sit and stand and move around.

Keep your back straight

If there is one thing to remember, it is to bend at your knees and keep the load you're attempting to lift close to your body. If you already have back problems, consider a raised bed or a Back-Saver handle attachment.



WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Anne Clarke weeds a 34-inch-high raised bed from a standing position. The need for tools is minimized by using a light potting soil, enriched with compost. Photo by Vivian Mizuta.

Garden bed and plants

Keep gardens and beds small

This will keep you from feeling overwhelmed or tempted to do too much.

Use raised beds or containers

Minimize stooping by standing at a bed 34" high, or sit on the ledge of a bed 24" high. There are commercial, ready-made, raised beds at the greenhouse supply in Mount Vernon, or construction plans at the WSU extension office.

Choose low-maintenance plants

Perennials will lessen spring chores. Vegetables can climb a trellis. Trees can be espaliered on garden fences. Visit the Discovery Garden Easy Care/Waterwise Garden for plant ideas.

Ergonomic and helpful tools

Levers, gears, and ratchets, oh my! In this category, there are gift-giving opportunities for every body. Sometimes the oldest tool design is still the best (my favorite Warren hoe, for example), and can be adapted with a new handle that takes the stress from certain joints.

Look for the Arthritis Foundation seal on new, lightweight tools that require less strength.

Keep tools clean and sharp

Sharp, nonrusty edges take much less effort from your own body and are safer.

Softer, lighter, padded handles

These are easier to grip if you have less hand strength, and are more slip-resistant.

Thumbs UP, neutral wrist position

Many hand tools are now coming with a thumb rest/thumb pad on top of the handle. This helps reduce wrist strain by using arm strength, preventing you from "chopping" with your wrist. You often can use this same position on your old tools.

Reaching devices

Grabbers, pole-type pruning rods, and longer-handled tools will keep you off dangerous ladders and stools, as well as minimizing bending while improving leverage.



An example of the "thumbs up" position on tools designed with a thumb rest pad on the handle. Using this position on any garden hand tool will help to prevent wrist strain. Photo by Anne Clarke.



If you have limited hand or arm strength, using an anvil-type ratchet pruner on dry, woody stems will ease fall gardening tasks. Photo by Anne Clarke

Want to learn more? There are many good sources of tools and plans for easier gardening. The Spokane Master Gardeners have an excellent booklet, "Gardening for Life," which can be ordered online from <http://pubs.wsu.edu>, or in booklet form from the Master Gardeners at 509.477.2048, or printed in free PDF form online.