

Adapting Gardening When Mobility is Limited

By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

Our gardens are wonderful places where we create, work, and enjoy the peace and beauty generated by our efforts. Many believe that gardening is good for the body, mind, and overall feeling of wellbeing. Spending time growing vegetables and flowers can give a gardener a sense of accomplishment. All these benefits can be enjoyed by anyone but are especially rewarding as we age or have physical challenges.

Physical challenges to gardening can be overcome with a few modifications allowing everyone to reap the benefits of connecting with nature. All aspects of gardening can be modified, including the garden itself, the plants used, the gardener, and the tools used. For details, see “Gardening for Life - A Guide to Garden Adaptations for Gardeners of All Ages and Abilities”, <https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/gardening-for-life-a-guide-to-garden-adaptations-for-gardeners-of-all-ages-and-abilities> .

Adapting the Garden

Raised Bed Gardening

A raised bed is a form of gardening that elevates the soil above ground level for ease of access and soil improvement. It is usually enclosed by brick, stone or wood and the soil is often enhanced with compost. You can also find raised bed planters that allow a gardener to approach from all sides and are great alternatives for seniors who want to sit to garden or persons who require mobility aids. Below you will find a link to using raised beds from the University of Tennessee.

The Tennessee Vegetable Garden Building and Using Raised Beds

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W346-E.pdf>

Vertical Gardening

A vertical garden, also known as a ‘living wall’, is a garden that grows up instead of along the ground. It can be as simple as a trellis in a large pot or hanging baskets or it can encompass an entire wall. Plants are positioned at a height that does not require bending or stooping and is easier on the gardeners backs and knees. If this appeals to you check out the link below for plenty of pictures of vertical gardening projects.

Vertical and Rooftop Gardens

<https://www.niu.edu/communiversitygardens/pdf/projects/Vertical-Rooftop-Gardens.pdf>

Square Foot Gardening

This is a method that divides the garden into easily worked one-foot squares in a raised bed. Different flowers or vegetables can be planted into each section. Each square is easily accessed and managed and is an efficient use of space. You could try growing dwarf versions of your favorite trees and shrubs in a square.

Square Foot Gardening

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/design/types-of-gardens/square-foot-gardening.html>

Indoor and Container Gardening

Indoor gardening is also rewarding, and you can easily grow houseplants or have a windowsill garden for herbs. Grow low maintenance succulents which require less watering and are more resistant to pests and diseases. Or consider putting together a terrarium, which once set up, requires minimum maintenance.

Plant Selection

If using raised beds or large planters, using shorter plants means less reaching and straining to care for the plants and harvest vegetables. Tall plants, like tomatoes, can be planted at ground level and staked or caged to hold them upright for ease of maintenance. For those with impaired vision, choose brightly colored flowering plants.

The Gardener

Techniques to adapt the gardener includes using techniques designed to avoid injury and tiring of joints and muscles. Stretching lightly to warm up before gardening can help avoid muscle strain. Keep a seat and a cool drink handy whenever you are in the garden to avoid dehydration and overheating, and wear light colored clothing with long sleeves to further prevent sunburn. Invest in a good pair of gloves or even gauntlets that protect your arms from thorns or other sharp objects. Sun protection UV/UPF clothing and hats are now made in a variety of styles that are light and comfortable, and don't forget the sunscreen! Keep an umbrella with your garden tools for shade when you need it.

Adaptive Tools

You can also add ergonomically designed tools to help meet the challenges of gardening. Look for tools and other equipment that are lighter in weight and designed to be used by arthritic or weaker hands. Use a **garden fork** instead of a spade for digging, it's easier on the hands and typically won't cut into plant roots. **Cape Cod** or **Japanese style** weeders are great for weaker hands. They are both sickle type weeders that cut the roots just below the surface. You can also find telescoping or standard 6-foot versions of these tools.

Try using '**ratcheting**' versions of pruners (also known as secateurs) and trimmers. A ratcheting tool will hold the cut when you release pressure until you cut all the way through. This way you can rest your hand if needed but still get the job done.

A **standing weeder** is an easy way to rid your garden beds and lawn of any unwanted plants. It consists of a pole with a metal claw and lever on the working end. The claw is positioned over the weed and lever is depressed by your foot and the weed is removed with no bending over. **Stirrup hoes** are another version of a standing weeder that work best on the flat ground of established flower and vegetable beds.

A **garden seat on wheels** or a **garden cart** can be a big help to those who tire easily or just want a portable seat while gardening. Large wheels ensure the seat or cart can go over most terrain comfortably. They come with storage space for tools and handles for towing the seat or cart to and from the garden.

Soaker hoses or even a simple **irrigation system** will make watering much easier, with just a quick turn of the faucet you can water your entire yard. You could also replace the knobs on your outdoor faucets with **levers** to make the job even easier.

Regardless of age or ability, gardening can still be a rewarding pursuit with thoughtful considerations and modifications. Gardening is good for the body, mind, and overall feeling of wellbeing that all of us can achieve.

The next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. starts on **January 30, 2024** and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks from **10AM – 12noon.**

Call the Extension Office for information and application form: 423-574-1919

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.