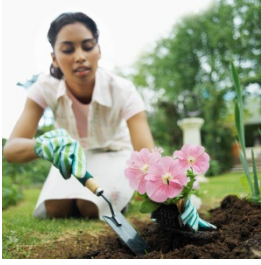


Flower Power



Ahhhhh yes! The snow is melting, the days are getting longer and the seed/flower catalogs are coming in the mail. Gardening season will soon be upon us. Oh, the feel of the earth around those fingers and the smell of flowers! Did you know that gardening can help you burn calories, help with boosting your bone density and also help reduce stress. But, are you ready for the challenge? That bending, squatting, twisting and raking does take its toll on your body, especially if you are not conditioned for this new activity. Yes, after hibernating and doing little activity all winter, you must think of gardening as exercise. Because of your decreased strength and physical conditioning your lower back and knees are target areas to get irritated.

We have assembled some tips to help your gardening experience be a good one this year. They include:

- The lower back muscles are not meant to hold your body flexed or bent forward as you are pruning, planting, weeding or lifting for hours at a time. If you have to work at lower levels, sit on a stool or kneel on a pad with side handles to help you get up with the use of your legs and arms. Using these items will keep your spine straight and reduce the strain on your lower back muscles.
- If you have to lift or pick-up objects, bend from your knees rather than your back.
- Use a long-handled prong to remove dandelions from your lawn or weeds from your garden. Look for long-handled hoes and spades with a push-pull action to reduce strain on the back.
- If you are doing a strenuous activity like digging, stop after 15-20 minutes. Do another easier activity or walk around, sit down and drink a glass of water. Take a little rest and then return to your activity. What you are doing is no different than exercising at the gym.
- Carry bags of dirt, mulch or fertilizer in a wheelbarrow. Make sure you do not overload the wheelbarrow. Squeeze your shoulder blades together while pushing the wheelbarrow.
- Raised garden beds, approximately 2-3' high and a maximum width of 4' will decrease the amount of bending and squatting. Using planters will also do the same thing.
- Using forest bark mulch to cover the soil will help prevent the growth of weeds and conserve moisture.
- Vary your activity. Don't just dig or weed all day. Do a little digging, a little planting, a little spreading dirt or compost.
- Start slowly with your gardening activity, especially if you have not done much activity over the winter. This is exercise, so start with 30-60 minutes per day and then slowly increase the duration of your gardening time as you feel less sore and tired.



There are exercises that will help you get strong for gardening. Try doing exercises BEFORE your gardening season. They may help reduce your muscle soreness, especially the first couple of weeks you're gardening.

You can start by doing 10 repetitions of the exercises shown in the diagram and slowly increase by increments of 2-5 repetitions, working up to 30 reps.

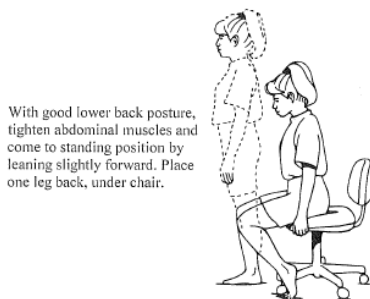
Try doing these exercises once or twice a day.



Raise opposite arm and leg. Do not arch neck. Hold 5 seconds.



With pillow supporting abdomen, and forehead resting on towel roll, keep knee locked and raise leg and opposite arm 6-8 inches from floor. Hold 5 seconds.



With good lower back posture, tighten abdominal muscles and come to standing position by leaning slightly forward. Place one leg back, under chair.

Happy
Gardening!