

Safe gardening is healthful gardening

Written by Dan Gill

Tuesday, 27 November 2012 17:44 -

Gardening is a well-documented and beneficial form of exercise. It contributes to a healthy lifestyle, and I am always impressed when I meet gardeners in their 70s, 80s and even 90s who are still actively gardening.

But the strenuous activities can also cause problems as well, especially for those of us who get very little exercise sitting at desks (and in front of TVs) during the week, only to get out and overdo it on the weekend. Sore muscles, aching backs, blisters and even sprains are common complaints of the weekend gardener.

The following information provides tips for maintaining your most important gardening tool – your body:

- Use proper body positioning to minimize muscle fatigue and soreness.

- Before you begin gardening, take a few minutes to stretch, which will help minimize muscle soreness and the risk of tendonitis.

- Let your general daily physical activity level serve as your guide for how long you can garden.

- Even if you do not feel fatigued, take a break for a few minutes every half hour.

- Change gardening tasks frequently. For example, if you are weeding and using the small muscles of your hands, rotate this task with watering, or hoeing or trimming shrubs where you are using larger muscles in a standing position.

- Bend at the knees and hips, not your back, to lift and hold objects. Maintain a firm grip with both hands.

- Use an erect body posture when working with long-handled garden tools, such as hoes, spades and rakes.

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- When it is necessary to work above shoulder level, perform the task for five minutes or less, then take a break or perform another activity before continuing.
- Keep the elbows partially bent while gardening, especially when doing resistive activities requiring elbow strength, like pushing.
- Avoid twisting the forearms back and forth repetitively (for example, pulling weeds by twisting the forearm palm up and then palm down). Consider using a weeding tool.
- Whenever possible, work with the forearms in a neutral position, thumbs up.

Keep these tips in mind when choosing which tools are best for you:

- Avoid tools that seem awkward to use. Ergonomic tools designed around human anatomy and proper body mechanics are ideal.
- Use lightweight yet sturdy tools. The handles should be covered with rubber to minimize friction. If your existing tools have wooden or metal handles, consider adding padded tape, such as AWrap N Grip® or pipe insulation foam.
- Particularly tall or short individuals should carefully evaluate the length of the long-handled tools they use to avoid excess strain on the back.
- A proper handle design on gardening tools is critical. Handles should be cylindrical and have a diameter between 1.25 and 1.75 inches.
- Be sure to keep tools sharp with a tool sharpener, such as a file or honing stone.
- Keep tools with moving parts in good working order and well-oiled so there is little resistance with use.

Keep these tips in mind with choosing your gardening gloves:

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- Gloves protect hands from hazardous chemicals, sharp items and blisters. They help minimize the effects of vibration. On the other hand, gloves decrease the feeling in the hand and decrease hand strength by as much as 30 percent.
- Gloves should be form-fitting without being restrictive. Thin gloves are preferable even though they will generally not last as long.
- Gloves should be made of material appropriate for the specific task, such as rubber gloves for mixing chemicals, leather gloves for pruning and cloth gloves for digging in the soil.

I might mention that the season of gift giving is right around the corner. If you know a gardener, ask them what kind of tools or glove they need. Or a gift certificate to a local nursery can be used to purchase what they want. If you are a gardener, don't forget to look for high-quality, ergonomically designed garden tools, and put those on your wish list.

It is also interesting to note that working on the hands and knees is common, but this can cause problems. You should avoid putting your weight on an open palm for long periods. Try to remain upright on your knees with your weight on your heels. Or if you have to get down on all fours, make a fist and place the flat knuckled portion of your hand instead of your palm on the ground, making sure to keep your wrist straight. This will minimize pressure on the carpal tunnel and reduce injury to that area.

Dan Gill is a horticulturist with the LSU AgCenter and is known as a reliable source of helpful, useful advice on lawn and garden topics. He can be reached at DGill@agcenter.lsu.edu