

Gardening Benefits and Safety Tips

Spring is here and summer is not far away! In March and April, gardeners prepare for the main growing seasons and the beauty and bounty that they bring. Gardening can be a great way to get physical activity, beautify the community, and grow nutritious fruits and vegetables.

Whether you garden 15 minutes a day or all weekend, gardening can be satisfying once you learn the basics. Health and safety should be a primary concern for all who garden, whether novice or expert. Take precautions so that your time is spent enjoying your garden, and not seeking emergency room care. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, in 2003, more than 71,000 consumers went to emergency rooms because of injuries related to push mowers, and nearly 15,000 suffered injuries related to riding mowers and garden tractors. Additionally, nearly 39,000 consumers went to emergency rooms with injuries related to garden tools and supplies.

Below are tips to help keep you garden-safe and healthy so that you can enjoy the months to come.

Dress to protect.

Wear protective attire if you use lawn and garden chemicals, use heavy tools and equipment, are around insects and poisonous plants, or work in the hot sun.

- Tall grasses may harbor creatures that sting or bite, so wear long pants, socks, and sturdy shoes or boots.
- Objects, such as small rocks, sticks, pine cones, or other debris, may be propelled from lawn mowers or other equipment. Wear safety goggles, sturdy shoes, and long pants when operating this type of machinery.
- Protect your hearing. When operating equipment or machinery, if you have to raise your voice to talk to someone who is an arm's length away, then the noise can be potentially hazardous to your hearing.
- To protect yourself from the sun and reduce your risk of developing skin cancer, wear long sleeves, wide-brimmed hats, sunscreen, and sun shades.
- Use sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher. The most effective products say "broad spectrum" or "UVA/UVB protection" on their labels. Continue to reapply sunscreen according to the package directions.
- To protect against West Nile Virus and other mosquito-borne diseases, use mosquito repellent and eliminate mosquito breeding sites.
- Take precautions to protect yourself against ticks and Lyme disease. If you are in an area with ticks, wear long-sleeved shirts, and tuck your pants in your socks. You may also want to wear high rubber boots since ticks are usually located close to the ground.
- Know what poison ivy or oak look like and take precautions.
- Wear gloves to lower the risk for small irritations or cuts.

Be physically active.

Scientific evidence shows that physical activity done at a moderate-intensity level can produce health benefits. If people have been sedentary, they can improve their health and well-being with regular, moderate levels of activity each day. Gardening is an excellent way to get physical activity, and gardeners are usually very eager to be active in the garden when the weather permits. Scientific evidence shows that

more active people are less likely to be obese or to have high blood pressure, type II diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, coronary artery disease and stroke, depression, colon cancer, and premature death than inactive people.

- Adults should engage in moderate-intensity physical activity for at least 30 minutes, five or more days of the week.
- If you do not currently engage in regular physical activity, you should begin by incorporating a few minutes of physical activity into each day, gradually building up to 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity activities. You can burn 150 kcalories by gardening (standing) for approximately 30-45 minutes.
- Vary your activities to keep your interest and broaden the range of benefits.

Put safety first.

If you haven't been active all winter, don't overdo it when you start. Plan ahead and work smart. Equipment and chemicals, such as lawn mowers, ladders, tillers, shovels, and pesticides, are commonly used in the garden. The potential for injury is high if you are distracted, are unaware of potential hazards, or use the chemicals or equipment improperly.

- Walking, lifting, pulling, pushing, bending, reaching, carrying, and hauling can lead to strains and exhaustion. Listen to your body and monitor your level of fatigue, heart rate, and physical discomfort.
- Watch how much repetitive motion is involved. Wrists, backs, elbows, and knees may be especially vulnerable to overuse during the season. Break up activities into manageable periods to ease the strain.
- Start at an easy pace and increase time or distance gradually.
- Keep harmful lawn and garden products, tools, and equipment out of the reach of children.
- Read instructions and warning labels.
- Make sure equipment is working properly and that you use it correctly.
- Unplug or disconnect power equipment before cleaning or making repairs.
- Clean tools properly and put tools and equipment out of the way to avoid tripping or falling.
- Be aware of slopes, holes, slippery spots, and uneven steps.
- Handle gas and electricity properly.
- Sharpen tools carefully.
- Reduce exposure to contaminants. The Environmental Protection Agency suggests that you use strong chemicals and poisons to protect your lawn and garden **only** when absolutely necessary.

Know your limitations. Use common sense.

Know yourself and any physical, mental, or environmental concerns that may impair your ability to work in the garden safely. Consult your health care provider about any precautions you may need to take.

- If you have arthritis, use tools that are easy to grasp and that fit your ability and circumstances. Recent studies have shown that moderate physical activity three or more days a week can help to relieve arthritis pain and stiffness and give you more energy. Regular physical activity can also lift your mood and make you feel more positive. If you are having an acute flare-up of your inflammatory arthritis, it may be better to restrict your exercise to

simple range of motion (carefully moving the joint as far as it can go) during the flare-up.

- Seek shade from the hot sun. If you must work in the sun, work in the early morning or late afternoon and drink plenty of fluids.
- Several factors affect the body's ability to cool itself during extremely hot weather. When the humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Other conditions related to risk include age, obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn, and prescription drug and alcohol use.
- Know that heat-induced illness can cause a person to become confused or lose consciousness.
- If you are taking medications that may make you drowsy or impair your judgment or reaction time, don't operate machinery, climb ladders, or engage in activities that may increase your risk for injury.
- Be aware of the signs of overexertion. Breathlessness and muscle soreness could be danger signs.
- Be aware of the warning signs and signals of a heart attack, such as sweating, chest and arm pain, dizziness, and lightheadedness.

Watch others.

Gardening can be a group or family affair. Friends or neighbors may help out with certain tasks. Kids enjoy the outdoors and oftentimes want to be involved. When it's hot, pay attention to what's happening with others. Even short periods of high temperatures can cause serious health problems. Doing too much on a hot day, spending too much time in the sun, or staying too long in an overheated place can cause heat-related illnesses. Know the symptoms of heat disorders and overexposure to the sun, and be ready to give first aid treatment.

- Anyone can suffer from heat-related illness, but some are at greater risk than others: infants and children up to four years of age; people 65 years of age or older; people who are overweight; people who overexert during work or exercise; and people who are physically ill.
- Make sure kids and others are not in danger from flying or sharp objects or tools, running equipment, and other possible hazards.
- If you are spraying or putting chemicals on or around the lawn or other plant material, make sure children and pets do not have contact with the chemicals. In general, keep chemicals out of the reach of children. Take steps to be safe.

Take breaks and stay hydrated and nourished.

There is a lot to do in the garden, and there's only so much time and daylight to do it in. Make sure you fuel your body sufficiently to help get you through the day's activities.

- Drink plenty of water throughout the day to replace lost fluids. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink.
- Don't drink liquids that contain alcohol or large amounts of sugar, especially in the heat. These actually cause you to lose more body fluid.
- Take frequent breaks and rest when needed. Try to rest often in shady areas so that your body's thermostat will have a chance to recover.
- Eat healthy foods to help keep you energized.

Get your immunizations.

Immunizations are for everyone, not just for kids. Adults and adolescents can also benefit from them.

- All adults should get a Td shot every 10 years.
- Tetanus lives in the soil and enters the body through breaks in the skin. Because gardeners use sharp tools, dig in the dirt, and handle plants with sharp points, they are particularly prone to tetanus infections. Before you start gardening this season, make sure your tetanus/diphtheria (Td) vaccination is up to date.
- While you are at it, ask your health care provider if you need any other vaccinations.

Enjoy yourself.

Take time to relax and enjoy the fruits of your labor. Make gardening fun, not stressful, hazardous, or harmful.