

Growing Connections: Gardening with Seniors

To grow a more meaningful and healthy connection with an elderly loved one, put on some rubber clogs and head out together to the garden.

At any age, gardening is one of the best activities we can do outdoors, several experts told AgingCare.com. It stimulates all of the senses; awakens our connection with nature and with each other; and rewards us with fresh flowers and juicy tomatoes. "It's restorative, even if you have dementia," says Dee McGuire, a horticultural therapist at Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore. Gardening is also an excellent way for aging bodies to get a moderate-intensity aerobic workout, shed calories and stay flexible, according to a Kansas State University study. That's one reason why gardening remains popular with Americans well into their golden years. Indeed, about three-quarters of households age 55 or older participated in some form of lawn and garden activity in 2010, according to the National Gardening Association (NGA).

Still, there's no question that bending, lifting, kneeling, squatting, weeding and pruning—not to mention dealing with sun, heat and bugs—all become more challenging as we grow older.

But there are ways to cope. Bruce Butterfield, the NGA's research director, says his mother was able to garden until her death at age 96 by growing flowers in about 70 big pots connected to an automatic irrigation system. "She placed them around the patio so she could get to them easily using her walker," he says.

Protection against pests and the elements is important, too, both for caregivers and seniors. New York dermatologist Arielle Kauvar says gardeners should slather on sunscreen and insect repellents before putting on clothes, so no area is overlooked. "And don't forget to protect your lips," Dr. Kauvar says, suggesting a lip balm with an SPF of at least 30.

Here are more tips for aging gardeners from these and other experts:

Rethink the Landscape

- Reassess the yard with an eye to lowering maintenance. Wherever possible, remove lawn and replace it with ground covers, mulched beds, and paved areas or paths.
- Add benches or chairs under shady trees.



- Create raised beds to improve drainage and make harvesting easier. Lightweight plastic landscape timbers can be stacked to form raised beds at waist or wheelchair height, if necessary. Make the beds narrow, so anyone can reach into the center without straining.
- Make vertical gardens by growing vining plants upward using trellises, tomato cages, bamboo stakes, fences, walls or arbors as supports. It will cut down on bending and make harvesting easier.
- Change steps to wide, curving, gently sloping paths. Use pavers or fine gravel to line paths rather than wood chips or river rocks. Paths should be at least four feet wide to allow walker and wheelchair access, and wider at the end so wheelchairs can turn around.
- Build high fences to keep out deer and other pests. Add latches and locks to gates if the gardener has memory problems and is prone to wandering.
- Install an irrigation system to cut down on watering, and low-voltage lighting to improve visibility on paths and steps in the evenings.
- Plant in containers using lightweight "soil-less" mixtures and resin or foam-walled pots to reduce weight. Put pots on casters.
- Avoid hanging baskets, since they dry out quickly, require frequent fertilization, and can be difficult to reach.

Tend to the Gardener

- Work in the morning and evening, when it's coolest.
- Bring a water bottle to prevent dehydration.
- Wear sturdy shoes, a broad-brimmed hat and gardening gloves.
- Bend at the knees and hips to avoid injury.
- Move from one activity to another to avoid stressing any particular muscle group.
- Paint tool handles in neon colors or wrap them in brightly colored tape so they're easy to find if dropped.
- Use manual shears instead of power hedge clippers to avoid accidents.
- Hire labor (or commandeer adult children and grandchildren) to do the heaviest lifting, digging and grading.
- If there's no room for a backyard garden, join or form a community garden.
- If a garden-loving senior becomes bedridden, bring the outdoors inside. Plant a mini-garden in pots on the windowsill, or create a maintenance-free terrarium in an old glass or plastic container

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