



Avoid physical injury while gardening

Although it's considered a leisure activity, gardening can be a somewhat strenuous physical activity, but being careful can help prevent injuries.

Gardening is one way to combine your favorite outdoor activity with physical activity, which is great for helping to maintain a healthy lifestyle. While the preparation isn't as rigorous as getting ready to run a marathon, gardeners should do a few warm-ups before heading outside.

The nature of gardening activities puts avid gardeners at higher risk for injury than those with more sedentary hobbies. Gardening chores such as raking, weeding, stooping, squatting and gripping are akin to light aerobic exercise and can put stress on a gardener's hands, wrists, neck, shoulders, back, hips, knees and ankles. Although exercise is good for the body, these repetitive motions can cause problems.

Before heading outdoors to tackle the gardening tasks, take some time to do some warm-ups. Walk around the house to warm up your muscles. Concentrate on the core muscles as you move. Do some sit-to-stand exercises to help strengthen thigh and core muscles. This can help improve stability and improve mobility. Another option to improve stability and prevent falling is to practice standing on one foot.

Gardeners certainly don't want to pull a hammy, so hamstring stretches are a good idea and can help prevent pain in the lower back, knees and feet.

When in the garden and doing tasks that are repetitive, switch to a new activity every 15 minutes. Change positions often and avoid overreaching.

In addition to stretching, another tip to make gardening tasks a little easier is to use ergonomic tools. The local garden center likely offers a variety of these tools that are designed to place less stress on the body during use, which helps to prevent injuries. Gardeners can also consider wearing padded gloves or wrapping the tool handles with padded tape. These options can help increase traction for gripping or decrease the strength needed to grip the tools. This, too, helps decrease stress and strain on joints.

With the heat index at dangerous levels, make sure to wear sunscreen and drink lots of water before, during and after time spent in the garden. A wide-brimmed hat is helpful to keep the sun off your face and neck.

Even though gardeners aren't preparing for the Olympics, it's still a good idea to loosen up a little before heading out to do your gardening chores.