

# Great Gardening Guidelines for a Healthy Body



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Spring is well and truly upon us, and all those of us with gardens will spend time tidying, freshening, and managing our personal havens. Following the overenthusiastic tackling of the garden, it is not at all uncommon to see a significant number of people with back, neck or knee pain. The advice within this article is designed to help you plan your gardening, so that you can enjoy your garden, not suffer because of it.

## Equipment

Choose garden tools for you! This may sound facetious, however when buying tools remember you are the one using them, and are they best suited for your requirements.

**Spades and Forks** – are they long/short enough for you. Too long and you will lean back and be off balance, too short and you will lean forwards and flex your back, putting yourself at risk of damaging discs.

**Clothing** – Restrictive clothing may alter the way you move and put you in altered postures. Flowing clothing may catch and contribute to a fall or an accident.

**Wheelbarrows** – does the wheelbarrow move freely when empty? A sticky wheel will become more difficult to rotate when the barrow is full. Do not leave a barrow until it is full to overflowing before moving it. There is far less strain on the back and knees to do more journeys of lighter loads.

**Secateurs** – a common gardeners cause of “tennis elbow” is overenthusiastic pruning with Secateurs. Try to limit pruning to short bursts intermingled with other activities. Secateurs with a “cut and hold” action can help to reduce some of the symptoms.

**Lawnmowers** – The height of the handle should be so that the operator can stand fully upright whilst moving forwards. Never swing the mower from side to side, and choose the right mower for the size of garden.

## Digging

Restrict digging to small short bursts, and then have a change of activity. Do not be tempted to use a spade too big for you to be able to lift safely when “fully loaded”.

## Planting and Weeding

Plant from a kneeling position if your knees allow it. Squatting puts a large strain on the knees and also makes you less balanced.

If possible use a weeding mat with or without handles. If you have to sit on a small stool, ensure it is as close to the task as possible and move it regularly to avoid over-reaching. However it is inevitable that in this position your back is at more risk than with kneeling. Think about your planting – ground cover plants help reduce the need for continual weeding. Might raised beds be better? The maximum depth should be no more than 4ft for ease of access and to avoid overreaching.

## Watering

Place “thirsty” plants nearest your water source to reduce the distance for carrying water. It may be best to have two watering cans, and ½ fill each, spreading the load equally when you carry. If possible invest in a hose that has an automatic rewind system to avoid too much bending and turning when storing the hose.

What should you do if you do develop pain?

**Back Pain** Try to stay as gently active as you can, avoid lying in a hot bath, as this position can aggravate disc problems – better to have a warm shower to relax the muscles. The application of ice may help – a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea towel can be a simple and effective ice pack- 10 – 15 mins should do it. If you don’t experience any reduction in symptoms after 48 hours seek advice from your GP or a Chartered Physiotherapist.

**Neck Pain** The advice for this is similar to that of back pain, but you may wish to roll a small towel up and place under your neck at night to give it a little more support when sleeping.

**Knee problems** If your knees are swollen apply ice packs as described above. Try to keep your knees gently moving, and simple exercises such as bending and straightening, and lifting alternate straight legs will assist in keeping them mobile.

**Elbow and Shoulder Pain** Gentle movement will maintain the range of movement, and the use of ice on the elbow can be particularly helpful.

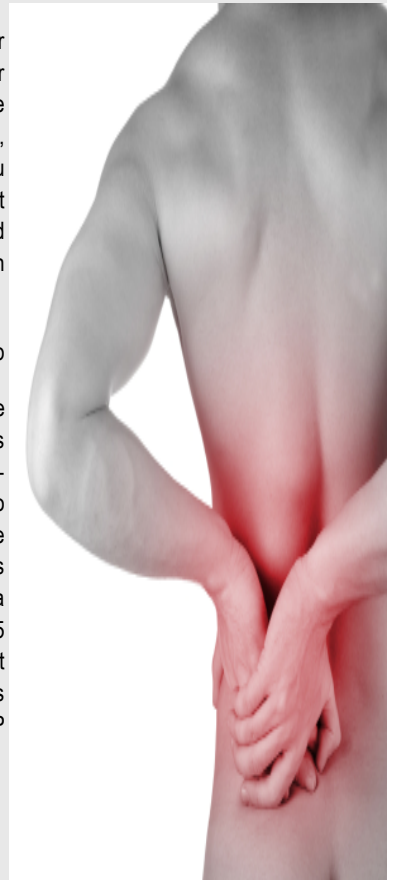


## Planning your tasks

Whilst gardening is not a sport it is a physical exercise. If you were to attempt a 5 mile run without training, there would be no surprise if you developed aches and pains because of it. Gardening should be viewed in the same way – set a “training” programme and stick to it. Do not expect to be able to do a full day of gardening without building up to it, start with ½ to 1hr and gradually increase.

Try to mix and match the activities in the garden to give you a whole body workout rather than becoming sidetracked into one task. Break your “exercise session” into manageable chunks of weeding/pruning/digging, so that your body works in many different postures and shares the load throughout the body.

Be realistic – if you can see a task ahead involves difficult lifting or moving, ask for assistance, rather than being too impatient to finish.



**With any injury you should stop doing the aggravating activity until your symptoms are fully resolved, or until advised to return by your medical professional.**

For further advice on your aches/pains/injuries please contact Bevan Wilson, your local Physiotherapy and Sports Injuries Clinics.

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