

# Gardening with Arthritis

## ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



### What Are the Benefits of Gardening?

Gardening has health benefits for everyone, including those with arthritis, as it keeps you physically active. The exercise of gardening and working with our hands in the soil has been shown to trigger serotonin and dopamine release, both of which can boost mood and wellbeing. Tending to a garden and watching it grow can also be hugely beneficial for your mental health. There is the optimism of planning and planting for the future and watching growth with a sense of fulfilment. This in turn allows you to cope with pain and is useful in helping those who also suffer from low mood and anxiety.

Being outside in the fresh air, spending time in nature, with the world around you filling your senses is also very therapeutic.

You can connect with others through gardening. This could be through sharing flowers and vegetables, or by joining a community gardening group, which would allow you to get involved, even if you have no or little outside space yourself.

As a form of exercise, you can garden 'little and often' to keep your joints mobile.

Dr Wendy Holden, Honorary Consultant Rheumatologist and Medical Advisor for Arthritis Action says:

*"Whatever type of arthritis you have, staying active, keeping your joints moving and looking after your sleep and mental wellbeing are all vital to help beat pain. Gardening is ideal for the joints as it is exercise in the fresh air, relaxing and satisfying."*

## Can gardening cause arthritis?

There is no evidence that any exercise, including gardening, causes arthritis.

For people living with arthritis, some gardening activities can lead to pain, particularly if you overdo it. Good technique, doing little and often, using appropriate tools and thinking about your garden set up are important for continued enjoyment.

## Our Top Tips

When you have arthritis, you may feel cautious about doing some gardening activities. Follow our advice so you can make the most of your time in the garden.

- **Plan ahead:** Take time to plan what you want to do, how you will do it and who can help. This will save time and effort in the long run.
- **Warm up:** As with any physical activity, it's important to warm up first. Potter about, do some light work, ensure you are dressed appropriately for the weather, and have the tools you need to hand.
- **Start low, go slow:** If you've been less active during the colder months, your body will need time to adapt. Gradually increase how long you're active for, and the effort you make while doing it.
- **Pace yourself:** It can be tempting to spend hours working in the garden or want to get a job finished but this could leave you feeling stiff and sore the next day. Take time to 'stop and smell the roses'!
- **Take breaks:** Staying in the same position for too long can lead to stiffness and pain. Be sure to schedule frequent stretch breaks.
- **Lighten the load:** Many gardening activities can put extra stress on your joints, whether it's kneeling for a long time, lifting heavy loads or gripping garden tools. You can use assistive devices to help.
- **Bring the garden to you:** If working at low levels is difficult for your hips, knees or back, consider raised planters or an elevated container garden. You may find it easier working from a seated or standing position rather than having to bend down or kneel.
- **Change tasks:** As the saying goes, sometimes 'a change is as good as a rest'. If you're keen to continue working in your garden but want to minimise the strain on your joints, change tasks often to use different parts of your body. If you've been kneeling for a while, try a task in a standing or seated position.

- **Positioning yourself:** Remember to keep your joints properly aligned with good posture to avoid injury or unnecessary stress.

## Choosing Gardening Tools

One of the main questions asked by gardeners with arthritis is which tools to choose. When purchasing new tools, try to do so in person, if possible. Handling the tools before buying them gives you the opportunity to test them for weight and balance.

### Ergonomic tools

- You can find ergonomic versions of many garden tools, particularly hand tools. Many of these have handles designed to reduce hand and wrist strain, making every day gardening jobs more comfortable to do.

### Multi-change tools

- Multi-change tools give you a choice of handle lengths. You can then change the tool head for different jobs. It is worth checking you are comfortably able to switch the heads around before buying.

## Making Your Garden Arthritis-Friendly

If you have arthritis, you don't need to completely overhaul your garden, but there are some changes you could put in place so looking after your garden is easier to do.

### Top Tips for Adapting Your Garden

- Make access easier by using raised beds, vertical gardens, hanging baskets, or containers
- Reduce stress on joints and muscles from repetitive movements by using garden tools that keep hands and wrists in a good position
- Minimise bending and stress on back, neck and shoulders by using special long-reach easy grip tools – this includes bulb planters
- Reduce the amount of weeding you do by applying a weed barrier with mulch
- Reduce the amount of force required to trim plants by using power assisted tools

## Helpful resources

- Thrive are a gardening for health charity and have lots of information and advice for people with a range of health conditions or disabilities <https://www.thrive.org.uk/>

*Last reviewed: July, 2024*