

Gardening for people with weakness, disability, pain, and loss of mobility has gotten a lot of attention from occupational therapists recently, and found to be very helpful both for strengthening muscles and fostering a positive outlook. In fact, there's a new phrase used to describe gardening when undertaken for these reasons: "horticultural therapy."

For most people, though, the motivation for gardening is the same as it was before their diagnosis: to beautify their

weight and comfort. Choose well-balanced lightweight tools to help prevent stresses and strains in your hands and arms. Find the best way for you to carry your tools, using a garden cart, wheelbarrow, tool carrier, bucket, or a tray or basket attachment if you use a wheelchair. A garden cart with an aluminum frame allows you to carry long tools and hand tools as well as a refuse sack. Carry hand tools in a tool belt, apron or bag, whatever you find easy.

How does your garden grow?

Gardening for exercise, fun, and a rewarding harvest

surroundings, connect with nature, enjoy the harvest and spend some time moving around in the fresh air. It's a plus that gardening also provides multiple benefits for muscles and state of mind. And occupational therapists say gardeners are more likely to stay physically active than those who go to a gym or work out at home. Why? Because they're doing what they like rather than "exercising."

There's another reason why gardening is more rewarding than individual exercises, says Lauren Catlett, whose job involves planning projects for aging and disabled adults: "Connecting with nature is important, and it's often a major loss as people become more disabled," she said. "Any exposure to the outside or to growing things is beneficial emotionally as well as physically."

Getting started

"Carry on Gardening," a service of "Thrive," an international non-profit devoted to the quality of life for people with disabilities, has some ideas you can use to get started. Actually, some of the ideas are worth considering BEFORE you start. Think about the job you're going to do and plan what will make it easier for you. It might be as simple as making sure you have a kneeler with you to save your knees, or a stool or seat to work from to take rests.

The right tools. Make sure you choose the right tools for the job. Try out tools before you buy them and check for

Pace yourself. Stop work before you get too tired, and be sure to take breaks. You might find it easier to move your equipment around the garden in relay fashion, taking your chair out first, then your tools. Hand rails and resting places can ease the strain of moving around the garden. Also, make sure that your paths are even and have a non-slip surface. If you find it difficult to carry things, you might want to carve out a garden near the house or the place you keep your gardening equipment. TMA members Nicole and Mo Bolger of Colorado engineered a slow but effective method for removing dirt from trenches or other building projects. Rather than filling a huge (and heavy) gardening bag, Mo simply doubles plastic grocery bags and fills them with dirt, easily carried and removed.

From a wheelchair. If you can transfer, choose a seat to work from that is comfortable to use, and stable. Some gar-



den kneelers can be used as a seat when turned upside down but make sure you place them on even ground. Rather than move a seat around everywhere, try to have permanent seating around the garden to work from as well. If you can't leave your wheelchair, re-think your garden layout to make it easier to work sitting down. Raised beds, containers, easy-reach trained fruit trees and replacing the lawn with hard surfacing are all ideas that can help.

Raised beds

As the world's population ages, raised beds are becoming popular as a universal solution to gardening for all ages. They're helpful as a way to improve soil, avoid erosion, outsmart small nibblers, cut down on weeding and allow people with impaired mobility to sit on the side while they perform gardening chores. Remember that straight-sided raised beds make it hard for people in a wheelchair, since they need to be able to lean over the bed; and that raised beds are likely to require more water.

The Bolgers have gotten very creative with raised beds, using four galvanized tubs—originally used for watering livestock—in their yard. They are 4' in diameter and 2.5' tall so they are easy to maintain from a seated position. The Bolgers attached these to their automatic watering system.

For smaller planters, Mo and Nicole also came up with the idea of using empty plastic bottles instead of rocks for drainage, eliminating many pounds from moveable pots and containers.

The Bolgers are fans of ergonomic tools to limit body strain. They like the Peta Easi Grip Arm Support Cuff that has a cuff which allows control of your work from your upper arm and shoulder.

Heidi Sibert suggested going with lightweight fiberglass or foam containers on your porch or patio for easy

access, picking a container half the height of expected growth, and adding lightweight potting mix.

Pick low-maintenance

For those who maintain a traditional yard despite disability, nurseryman Nick Murphy of Indiana has some suggestions for undemanding plants.

English ivy. It will spread on its own with no help from you. Make sure to trim it if it advances on your walk or up the walls of your house.

Hostas. Divide to get more once the plants get big. Otherwise, let them grow and spread.

Boxwood or yew. Simple and attractive, all they need is a yearly pruning, which you can even forget from time to time.

Hydrangea. Pick the blooms for renewed bloom each year, bringing the cut flower heads inside for long-lasting decoration. Be careful not to cut back varieties that produce blossoms on year-old wood.

"Knock Out" roses or lantana for drought-resistance. Both plants are disease-resistant, require little pruning and watering once they're established, and add a vibrant splash of color.

Get a grip

Sheila Minney suggests Bionic Garden Gloves for padding and grip. Find them at www.bionicgloves.com. Nicole Bolger likes Berkeley gloves, a brand she found at Walmart. The Bolgers also recommend grip tape, the tape most commonly used on hockey sticks. They add it to rakes, weeders and extension grabbers. It's cheap, removable, and you can find it in sporting goods stores.

Consider your hands

Occupational Therapist Patricia Stevens reminds us to pay attention to our hands, a major concern of myositis patients, especially those with inclu-



sion-body myositis. Stevens, a certified hand therapist, comments on the importance of pacing yourself in the garden.

To avoid damage from doing repetitive tasks, using the same muscles in the same way, Stevens recommends limiting this type of motion to 15 to 30 minutes at the most. "Then take a break," she says, "and stop for a few minutes or

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do something different using muscles in a different way. Gardeners tend to love to weed for hours! This is very stressful to the joints and can be fatiguing or feed into inflammation."

After their weeding time is up, she advises clients to stop and rest, or put something in the shed, or go in and get a glass of tea. "Just stop using the same muscles in the same way for hours. Gardeners can develop repetitive strain issues like nerve compression and tendinitis like people who are on computers all day, or factory workers on assembly lines doing the same repetitive task." Unlike the factory workers, she says, Gardeners don't HAVE to do that forceful repetitive task for eight hours and can pace themselves.

And it's important to watch your grip, Stevens says. "Try to avoid overhand gripping. It is so reflexive to reach out and pick things up with an overhand grip. We aren't efficient with our power when we do that and can exert force and strain the hand, wrist and forearm with this. Instead, use the palm of the hand to slide an object towards you with one hand and pick it up in the palm of the other hand---using your hand like a 'shelf' instead of a 'derrick'. Then you transfer the power of lifting to the big muscles in the forearm, upper arm and even the shoulder that can handle it more easily. I call this the 'powerful palm'. Also if you lift using two hands instead of one, only 50% of the force is on any one hand."

As for tools: "Fat handled instead of thin; lighter instead of heavy tools," she says. And, she notes, there's a whole world of ergonomically designed tools to be found simply by googling "ergonomic tools."



"Most importantly," she says, "people need to listen to pain. Do more gardening and heavier tasks on 'good days,' not 'bad days'. Using heat or ice after doing gardening tasks may help to relieve issues. Each person has to see what works best for them.

For more information on adaptable gardening, visit Thrive's website at <http://www.carryongardening.org.uk>.

Send us your practical solutions

Do you have an original "workaround" for accomplishing something that is difficult? Or an idea that makes your daily life a little easier? We welcome "selfies," links to videos and written articles for a new section of TMA's website. Send links, photos and written material to tma@myositis.org.



Consider the conference: TMA goes to Reno

September 4 - 7, 2014 — Each year, we've tried to make the Conference more focused on the needs of myositis patients and their caregivers. This year, there will be more topics, speakers, and sessions focused on practical solutions, as well as more opportunities to spend time talking with others who face the same challenges as you. We invite you to join us in Reno!

Thursday, September 4

10:00am Registration opens
1:30pm Get Acquainted
3:00pm General Session
4:00pm Practical Solutions

Friday, September 5

7:45am Early-bird sessions
8:30am Breakfast
9:30am Morning sessions
11:00am Mid-morning sessions
12:30pm Luncheon
2:00pm Afternoon sessions

Saturday, September 6

7:45am Early-bird sessions
8:30am Breakfast
9:30am Medical Panel
11:00am Mid-morning sessions
12:45pm Luncheon
2:00pm Afternoon sessions

Sunday, September 7

7:15am Breakfast
8:00am Meet the board
9:00am Keynote speaker
10:15am Conference ends