



Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria

Gardening for seniors

Gardening has numerous health and therapeutic benefits for the elderly, especially when you create an edible garden. Garden beds, equipment and tools can all be modified so you can create a garden that is interesting, accessible and productive.

Some medical conditions and physical disabilities may restrict or prevent the elderly from participating in gardening. However with planning and a few changes you can create an edible garden that is safe, accessible, interesting and a pleasant space for seniors.

Gardening keeps you fit and healthy

Everyone can benefit from creating an edible garden. Seniors can get particular advantages including the following because gardening:

- Is an enjoyable form of exercise
- Increases levels of physical activity and maintains mobility and flexibility
- Encourages use of all motor skills – walking, reaching and bending and planting seeds and taking cuttings.
- Improves endurance and strength
- Helps prevent diseases like osteoporosis
- Reduces stress levels and promotes relaxation
- Provides stimulation and interest in nature and the outdoors
- Improved sense of wellbeing due to the social interaction.

Physical and mental considerations

There are certain physical, mental and age-related conditions that must be considered when older people work in the garden. These include:

- **Skin** – fragile, thinning skin makes the elderly susceptible to bumps, bruises and sunburn.
- **Vision** – changes in the eye lens structure, loss of peripheral vision and generally poorer eyesight.
- **Mental abilities** – mental health, thinking and memory abilities may be affected by dementia and similar conditions.
- **Body temperature** – susceptibility to temperature changes and tendency to dehydrate or suffer from heat exhaustion
- **Skeletal** – falls are more common because balance is often not as good, osteoporosis and arthritis may restrict movement and flexibility.

Changes to equipment, tools and the garden

Garden spaces, tools and equipment can be modified or adapted to help reduce the physical stress associated with gardening. Suggestions include:

- Use vertical planting to make garden beds accessible for planting and harvesting – try using wall and trellis spaces
- Raise beds assist people with physical restrictions from bending and stooping
- Provide retractable hanging baskets, wheelbarrows and containers on castors to make suitable portable and elevated garden beds
- Find adaptive tools and equipment which are available from some hardware shops
- Use foam, tape and plastic tubing to modify existing tools
- Use lightweight tools that are easier to handle

- Provide shade areas for working in summer months
- Have stable chairs and tables to use for comfortable gardening.
- Ensure that there is a tap nearby or consider installing a drip feeder system for easy watering.
- Make sure the toilet is nearby.

Safety in the garden

Here are a few safety tips that older people and their carers should follow when working in the garden:

- Attend to any cuts, bruises or insect bites immediately
- Avoid the use of power tools
- Secure gates and fences if memory loss is an issue
- Ensure that paths and walkways are flat and non-slip
- Warm up before gardening and encourage frequent breaks
- Prevent high sun exposure by working in the garden early in the morning or late in the day and apply sunscreen frequently
- Drink water and juice and avoid alcohol
- Wear protective shoes, lightweight comfortable clothes that cover exposed skin and wear a hat and gardening gloves
- Store garden equipment safely

Plant selection

An edible garden is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and plants that you can eat. You should also consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities as well because the elderly often have problems with sight. Sensory plants include those that have special smell, taste, touch and sight qualities.

Gardening activities

There are many activities associated with cultivating an edible garden that seniors may enjoy. These include:

- Digging
- Planting.
- Watering
- Harvesting food and flowers
- Crafts and hobbies associated with plants
- Food preparation

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- Local council
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria

For further information contact –

Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria

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