



An ounce of prevention; a garden of pleasure

April showers have brought May flowers, and both bring on knee and low back pain (as well as some pesky weeds) we return to our outdoor gardening activities. This type of seasonal pain and discomfort is preventable with a few simple activities.

Protect your Knees

Many gardening tasks require knee strength and stability, whether kneeling, sitting, standing, or walking. The best way to protect knees from the stress and strain is to condition them with strengthening exercises and stretching.

The muscles that protect the knees are the quadriceps (front of thighs) and the hamstrings (back of the thighs). To ease strain on the knees, practice strengthening exercises regularly, and stretch before starting gardening activities. A consultation with your Physical Therapist at Integrated Rehabilitation Services can provide a program of prevention to include flexibility and strengthening for your lower extremities.

Squatting can put unnecessary strain on the knees if done incorrectly or for long periods of time. Preferred work positions would be having one knee on the ground, working on hands and knees using a kneeling pad, or sitting on a chair or stool. If you use a chair or stool, place it close to the area where you are working and use long handled tools to avoid straining the upper body. If a kneeling pad is inconvenient to carry, then try using strap-on knee pads.

Watch Your Back

Lower back pain, whether caused by muscle aches, arthritis, or a herniated disk, can make gardening a difficult task.

Exercise can have many benefits for individuals recovering from or preventing low back injuries. Exercising can help to maintain flexibility and fitness level, preventing the muscles and tissues from tightening up, which can increase susceptibility to strain or injury. The Physical Therapists of Integrated Rehabilitation Services can provide a good program of preventative exercises.

To avoid aggravating a back injury, it is important to know how to move, sit, stand, and work in ways that will reduce strain. When walking keep a slight arch in the lower back, slightly tensing the abdominal muscles, and don't slouch. Sit with feet supported and knees level or higher than hips. Use correct postures when doing garden chores such as raking, shoveling, weeding, or planting.

Always bend from the knees, never from the waist and use these suggestions when lifting a large or heavy object:

- stand the object upright,
- position feet shoulder-width apart, close to the object,
- squat or bend at the knees,
- tighten stomach muscles,
- hold the object close to your body so that the thigh muscles are doing most of the work, and
- slowly lift by straightening knees.
- lower loads by reversing this process.

Be careful when pushing or pulling heavy objects – use your leg muscles and not the back. Never use jerky, twisting, or rough movements; move slowly and deliberately. Let gardening equipment and tools do the job for you. For example, use large-wheeled garden carts that support their own weight to transport items around the garden. Whenever possible, find someone to assist you with lifting, pushing, or pulling.

Long-handled tools can make work easier by extending reach and reducing body movement necessary to complete a task. Lightweight and small-bladed tools can reduce the amount of load and resistance. Stand as close to the work area as possible, and use arms and legs to do work instead of the back.

Additional tips:

- Mow lawns regularly so that grass doesn't get too tall. An overgrown lawn takes more effort to mow.
- Adjust mower handle height to hip level and push mower with a straight back.
- Many new mowers have "power assist" features. Be careful to adjust the pace to avoid straining the back, trying to either hold the mower back or push against the power drive.
- Use a watering wand with an on/off control. Raise the spigot; relocate to edge of beds with short length of hose and post.
- Choose low maintenance plants such as groundcovers instead of annuals.
- Ask others for assistance with tasks that are difficult or cause strain.
- Buy garden supplies in small, light-weight quantities.
- Take frequent breaks and rotate between jobs so that back or knees are not strained for long periods of time.
- Be conscious of the twisting motion that can be produced when throwing mulch or shoveling soil as it can cause back strains.
- Be aware of situations that could lead to a fall such as wet lawn or loose gravel.

By taking care of yourself and preventing injuries while gardening, it will allow you to enjoy your garden all season long. Feel free to contact your Physical Therapist at Integrated Rehabilitation Services for individualized instruction on how to prevent or alleviate knee and low back pain from gardening.