

## Preventing Gardening Injuries

By Karen Doyle, Physical Therapist

*'What a man needs in gardening is a cast-iron back, with a hinge in it'. ~Charles Dudley Warner, My Summer in a Garden, 1871*

With the long stretch in the evening working in the garden will become the focus of many weekends and bank holidays. In the UK gardening accounts for up to 87,000 visits to the A&E in the UK with lawnmowers and flowerpots being the key culprits of the injury. In my own clinic muscle strains, and back pain are the key gardening injuries clients visit with. With this in mind I've put together a few tips on how to try and avoid injury when gardening this year.

Look after your back:

- Bend at knees when lifting and use the strength of your legs to help lift. This will help keep the back straighter and reduce back ache.
- Carry loads close to the trunk as you would carry a small child – carrying loads with straight arms can strain the lower back and also the muscles from the shoulder to the neck. Think about a weight lifter when he starts to lift a heavy dumbbell with two straight arms – you can see the how his neck strains and the veins in his neck are noticeable as he lifts the weight. Similarly although maybe not to the same extent, your neck will strain if you lift and carry loads with straight arms.
- Rather than carry a few heavy loads, carry more frequent but lighter loads. Use the wheelbarrow to help transfer heavy objects but again make sure the load is not too heavy.
- Engage your core. Your core is composed of muscles that surround the spine. When you contract these they take some pressure off the spine and could help protect against back pain. To engage your core draw your in stomach as if you were pulling your navel in towards your back. Make sure that you do not hold your breath when doing this. When lifting objects or working in the garden try to remember as much as possible to engage your core by doing this movement.

Take care of your neck and shoulders:

- To take care of your back, neck and shoulders ensure that your work bench is not too low which would cause you to bend excessively leading to pain. On the other hand work benches that are too high, where you have to lift your elbows up to rest on them, can lead to shoulder and neck pain.
- Use tools with longer handles to prevent too much bending when hoeing, digging, raking or shovelling, or when reaching above you to cut hedges or branches. Also consider the weight of the tool. When you use a tool again and again in repetitions for example like pruning a tree, the action and effort required would not be very different from doing a strengthening exercise in the gym where you lift weights above your head. When replacing tools considering replacing them with a reliable tool that is light. Heavy tools can tire the muscles



- Use a ladder or step to reach anything above head height. This means you avoid raising your arms above your shoulder which will help reduce the chance of shoulder pain.

In general consider:

- Don't try do it all yourself. Ask family members to help or engage the services of a landscaper or local handyman. If you'd like the phone number of a reliable gardener who can help let me know. (email [info@mapleclinic.ie](mailto:info@mapleclinic.ie))
- Take breaks. Stretch out the arms, shoulders, legs and torso. Don't stay too long in the one position.
- Mix up the various tasks that you are doing so that you do not over tire one part of the body. If you have a goal for the garden over the weekend try to split up the tasks over the two days. Concentrating on one task for the whole day may lead to strain, doing various different tasks may help you not to over tire one muscle group e.g. trimming the hedge and planting.
- Don't forget to drink water so you don't dehydrate, and to use sun screen to prevent burns.

#### The lower maintenance garden

Chronic pain, arthritis, or age related stiffness can cause frustration if you can't get out to the garden and work away as much as you would like. These are a few things that you could consider to make gardening less taxing but help you to continue to derive enjoyment from it:

- Replace existing flower beds with raised beds which will allow you sit in a chair or at the edge of a bed while working in the garden.
- Put weed guard and wood chippings down on the flowerbeds to prevent weeds growing and reducing the amount of weeding you need to do
- Increase the amount of paving to reduce the area of lawn to be mowed
- Replace flower beds with lawn and plant more pots to bring colour into the garden and which may be easier to look after
- Replace hedging with fencing or walls to minimise the amount of pruning and trimming you need to do. Plant creepers on the fence or walls to keep the colour in the garden.

Some effort will be required to do these activities so consider getting family or professional help to put a lower maintenance garden in. If you are reluctant to move to a lower maintenance garden consider the words of the novelist Victoria Glendinning;

*'Science, or para-science, tells us that geraniums bloom better if they are spoken to. But a kind word every now and then is really quite enough. Too much attention, like too much feeding, and weeding and hoeing, inhibits and embarrasses them.'*

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