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[8 Ways to Boost the Health Benefits of Gardening](#)

Getting dirty is good for you. Here's how to get the most out of it

[EN ESPAÑOL](#)

Spring is finally here, and for gardeners who've been cooped up in chillier parts of the country, that means it's time to get outside and get a little dirty — and maybe a little healthy, too.

Gardening is [good for you](#). Studies show it is real exercise, with benefits that may include everything from stronger hands to healthier hearts and longer lives. One [Swedish study](#) found lower rates of stroke, heart attack and early death among older gardeners, regardless of their other exercise habits. Gardening also can be a boon for the mind and a way to connect with other people.

Want to make a healthy habit even healthier? Consider these eight ideas:

1. Pick up the pace ... gradually

Physical activity guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services say adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week. Gardeners can “easily meet” the goal for moderate activity, says Candice Shoemaker, a retired professor of horticulture at Kansas State University.

Though a little weeding might not raise your heart rate much, anything that uses both the upper and lower body, such as digging, raking or pulling a hose can get you into the moderate activity zone, Shoemaker says.

If you've had an inactive winter, “maybe do little bouts at a time to build up” endurance, suggests Christine Zellers, a health educator with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cape May County, New Jersey. “Maybe walk back and forth a little bit, get your muscles warm, maybe even do some stretches,” she says.

2. Lift that bale ... with care

Government activity guidelines call for [strength-building exercises](#) at least a couple of times a week, and the heavy lifting involved in some gardening tasks can count, the guidelines say.

Shoemaker says her research shows that even light gardening tasks, such as potting plants, can [improve hand strength and finger dexterity](#) in older adults, including those recovering from strokes.

Gardeners need to know their own strength and act accordingly, Zellers says. When she works alone with heavy bags of mulch, she uses a bucket to carry manageable amounts to planting beds.

If you do lift heavy bags, avoid bending over and lifting in a way that strains back muscles, she advises. Instead, she says, bend from your knees and make your stronger leg muscles do the work.

If you do a lot of squatting in the garden, you can make those leg muscles, and all your lower body muscles, even stronger. But take care: Gardeners prone to sore knees might want to limit squatting and kneeling on hard ground by using a two-sided gardening stool with a padded seat that can double as a kneeler, Shoemaker suggests.

3. Be sun savvy

It can be tempting to look at gardening as a chance to soak up some sun and boost your vitamin D production. Though some doctors have suggested a few brief periods of unprotected sun exposure each week for that reason, the American Academy of Dermatology says it's better to get the bone-building vitamin from supplements and foods, such as salmon and fortified drinks. That's because sun exposure increases the [risk of skin cancer](#).

You should apply [sunscreen](#) with a protection factor of at least 30 about half an hour before going out, says Alison Ehrlich, a dermatologist in Washington, D.C.

Also sun-smart: a broad-brimmed hat, long sleeves and pants — which also will protect you from ticks and other insects, she notes, especially if you tuck the pants into high boots. Ideally, she says, you'd stay out of the sun from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.,

when the rays are strongest. Or, she says, you can “strategically garden in different areas of your yard” that are shady at different times of day.

4. Glove up

The gardener’s best defense against poison ivy, poison oak, rose thorns and various other hazards is a good pair of long, cuffed gloves, Ehrlich says. “People get poison ivy along their wrists and forearms because their shirt moves,” she says. She usually wears a leather pair in her own garden. In wet conditions, she says, you might want to top those with a waterproof pair.

5. Mask up

The same kind of face masks used to prevent COVID-19 can reduce seasonal allergy symptoms by reducing the pollen and mold spores you breathe in, [research suggests](#). Many allergy patients probably noticed a difference after they started masking against COVID, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. The group recommends people with outdoor allergies wear masks when mowing lawns or gardening.

Allergic gardeners should keep their gardening gloves, tools and shoes out of the house and shower when they go inside, the group says. Getting out of your clothes and into a shower will limit your exposure to any poison ivy oil stuck on your clothes or skin, Ehrlich says.

6. Grow with others — or for them

Joining a gardening club or community garden can make gardening a more social experience and intensify the physical and mental health benefits, studies suggest. Shoemaker says her research has shown that even solo gardeners can reap social benefits — by sharing what they grow. That might mean taking extra produce to neighbors or something more, she says. One man she interviewed grew flowers that he supplied to his church. “He said, ‘I met so many new people at my church, because they wanted to talk to me about my flowers,’ ” she recalls.

Zellers notes that just going outside to garden can open social doors. She says people stop and talk all the time when she’s out working in her beds. Those kinds of encounters can connect neighbors who might not otherwise speak, she says.

7. Grow more food

Flowers are lovely, but if your garden doesn't include edibles, you are missing out on an inexpensive way to add healthy food to your diet, Zellers and Shoemaker say.

"If you grow food, you're more likely to eat that food," Shoemaker says. Research shows older adults who garden eat more vegetables than those who don't.

If space is limited, start by growing a few herbs, Zellers suggests. Not sure what to grow or how to do it? Cooperative extension offices around the country are great sources for gardening tips, she says.

8. Stop and smell the roses (and listen to the birds)

One of the greatest mental health benefits of gardening, Zellers says, is the opportunity to unplug from everything else and spend some mindful time with nature. Research backs that idea: A 2022 study found that just seeing or hearing birds outside is enough to boost mental well-being, even for people with depression. "When I'm gardening," Zellers says, "I try to take a moment to notice like, wow, the sun's out, it's beautiful today, I feel it on my skin. ... It feels nice to be aware of those surroundings."

----- Written by Kim Painter, AARP, March 20, 2023

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