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Canadian
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WEED OUT THE SORENESS

Celebrating Health, Gardening and National Physiotherapy Month

The most important gardening tool is the human body. Proper body positioning, well designed gardening gloves and tools along with frequent rest breaks are the key to being a healthy gardener. Gardening is an active pursuit that can cause muscle strain to the lower back, shoulders, knees and arms, especially for those who are out of shape and do not move properly.

The members of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) want to ensure gardeners have an injury-free season. Thirty minutes of yard work, planting or raking leaves gives great general health benefits, such as preserving flexibility, increasing mobility and building strength and endurance. However, many people overdo it in the garden. With its focus on crouching, bending, reaching and lifting, gardeners need to prepare and be aware of their bodies. Aches, pains, sprains and sometimes even a fracture can result from improper positioning of the body, overuse of specific muscle groups, poor gardening technique and pushing to work harder and longer than needed.

“Most people do not take gardening seriously,” remarks Jan Bednarczyk, from North Shore Home Physiotherapy Services in Vancouver, BC. “It is an intense sport like skiing, hiking or sailing. Most people would not dream of spending six hours of skiing or golfing their first time out for the season...yet that is exactly what people do in their gardens.....they get so inspired in the spring that they overdo things.”

Whether you're a master gardener or budding amateur, Canadian physiotherapists *recommend that enthusiasts follow* these safety tips for tackling the gardening chores:

Begin with a warm up – Start with easy raking, or go for a five-minute walk to warm up your muscles. Follow this with stretching all major muscle groups to help prevent injury. Give your back, neck, hands and fingers some extra time when stretching.

Be aware of your posture and body mechanics – Move your feet instead of twisting at your waist when sweeping, raking, mulching or potting. If you can't avoid twisting, tighten your stomach muscles in order to protect your back. Use your legs rather than your back when lifting or unloading heavy bags or pots. Bend your knees, keep your back straight, and hold the object close to your body to prevent unnecessary strain on your back.

Use ergonomically correct tools – Buy tools with long handles to help with weeding. Build or buy a potting bench that is high enough to prevent unnecessary bending. Sit on the ground to trowel without bending over. When kneeling use a knee pad to avoid putting too much pressure on your knees. Wear gardening gloves to protect your hands from blisters, cuts and dryness.

Pace Yourself –Don't try to do everything all at once. Take breaks throughout your work and do some gentle stretching to keep limber. Vary tasks to make sure different muscles get used and one particular muscle group is not overworked. Repeated actions that use a specific muscle or muscle group can cause pain or injury.

PHYSIOTHERAPY.
IT'LL MOVE YOU.
LA PHYSIOTHÉRAPIE.
REDÉCOUVREZ LE MOUVEMENT.



Be smart in the sun – Wear a hat and use sunscreen to protect yourself from sunburn or heatstroke. Drink lots of water and try to work in the shade as much as possible to prevent dehydration.

Raking or hoeing – keep your tools close to your body and your back straight to reduce strain. Use your arms and avoid twisting your trunk. Use long-handled tools suited to your height.

- If you find you need to bend over or reach too far while raking, consider using an ergonomic rake (available at garden centres). It will make the job easier and reduce strain to your back.

Weeding or planting – do not bend from the waist. Squat or kneel on a kneeling pad. If you have difficulty getting up, use a kneeling pad / bench with a support handle for assistance.

- Give your back, legs and knees a break from stooping and kneeling by using tools with long handles to help with the weeding;
- Squat or sit on the ground to trowel, rather than bending over.

Digging or shovelling – insert the head of the shovel vertically into the ground and step on the blade. Lift small amounts at a time and bend at the knees, using your legs not your back to lift the load. Avoid twisting. Use a wheelbarrow to move big or heavy loads.

- Choose a shovel with a weight and handle length that is appropriate for your size and for the job you are doing;
- Give your back a break by using a smaller shovel, reducing the temptation to lift large amounts of soil;
- Spread heavy lifting and digging tasks over a week rather than a weekend, and spread major projects throughout the seasons. Take time to recover between them.

Lifting or carrying – know your limits and lift properly: bend your knees, not your back. Keep the load close to your body. Don't lift items that are too heavy for you to handle – get help! Use a wagon or wheelbarrow to transport supplies and / or to move or carry heavy items.

- A four-wheeled cart is sturdier and easier to use than a wheelbarrow;
- Lift with your knees slightly bent and your back straight. Avoid twisting or reaching.

Pruning or trimming – get as close to your work as possible. Don't stretch beyond your reach or past your stable footing. Rehearse the movement as a stretch first to test your ability and positioning.

- Match the size of the gardening tool handle to the size of your hand. Choose tools that you can hold so that your hand remains positioned in line with your forearm;
- Hold your tools in a loose comfortable grip. Holding too tightly may cause injury;
- Be creative! Adapt or create your tools for ease and comfort: For example:
 - Pad the handles of your gardening tools;
 - Use knee pads or a foam pad for kneeling; and
 - Wrap a slippery handle with tape to improve your grip (hockey stick tape will do).

For more information on gardening, visit the 'Gardening Tips' page found on the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's web site www.physiotherapy.ca/NPM2004gardeningtips.htm

Since 1984, physiotherapists from across the country have designated time each year to promote physiotherapy in Canada. This united voice brings power to the NPM message and focuses attention on the value of physiotherapy in Canadian Healthcare.

National Physiotherapy Month runs from April 23 to May 23, 2005. For more information about injury prevention, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's web site www.physiotherapy.ca, where you can find more information on gardening, along with the three other accompanying NPM themes – golfing, walking and running.

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