

# Lifelong Gardening

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

*“Sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.” Itzhak Perlman, after continuing a performance with a broken violin string*



Gardens aren’t the only thing that changes over time. Their caretakers change and age, too. But gardeners like Rodger Post, a resident at the Waverly Care Center, can testify that where there’s a will to keep on gardening, there’s a way. Post digs up weeds and does other outdoor chores at the Care Center from his wheelchair.

For gardeners who enjoy being outdoors and know they want to continue as long as possible, it’s worthwhile to give some thought to how their landscapes can be better designed or adapted to accommodate aging knees and backs and limited energy or mobility.

Gardening is one of the more restorative hobbies available. It offers tangible rewards—beautifies the surroundings, offers flowers and edible fruits and vegetables to bring indoors, is accessible right outside the door so it doesn’t require driving or other preparation. And intangibles—time outdoors, fuel for thought and imagination and connections to others with similar interests.

What are some of the things that can be done to ensure life-long enjoyment of our gardens? Here’s a few ideas:

## **Changes to the Garden**

- Place main gardens in areas with easy access. Avoid steep slopes and surfaces that get slick when it rains or that have loose or uneven footing.
- Create raised beds to avoid the need for bending and stooping.
- Use containers on castors to make them movable at ground level and hanging baskets where structures are available, possibly with a pulley system for raising and lowering.
- Use walls and trellises as vertical planting spaces that are more easily accessible from comfortable standing or seated positions.
- Provide shaded areas for a more sheltered and comfortable environment (some medications cause sensitivity to sunlight).
- Have faucets, hoses or other watering equipment readily accessible and preferably high enough to manipulate without kneeling.
- Have lots of seating and tables available for comfortable areas for work and rest.
- Replace annuals with perennials and grasses for garden interest with less effort each year.
- Substitute lower-maintenance shrubs for more demanding perennial beds.
- Choose the best time to do certain tasks; work outdoors in early morning when possible and postpone weeding and digging until soil is softened by rains or watering.
- Borrow and enjoy views from adjacent landscapes by trimming trees or otherwise blurring the boundaries.

## **Changes in Habits, Tools & Expectations**

- Rotate garden tasks every half hour or so to avoid repetitive motions.
- Bend at the knees and hips rather than from the back.
- Keep elbows partially bent and avoid twisting arms back and forth.
- Use lightweight, adaptive tools and equipment with ergonomic handles and designs.
- Attach handle extenders or use foam, tape and plastic tubing to modify existing tools; attach oversized pull grip handles on lawn mowers, trimmers and blowers.
- Use a reacher/grabber to reduce the need for stretching, reaching and bending to pick up weeds and leaves, put away tools, etc. They’re especially helpful for people with back problems or arthritis.
- Lower standards of perfectionism and consider what really needs to be done for the health of the garden vs. expectation of picture-perfection
- Consider hiring help a few times a week. Check with local cooperative extension offices, colleges or other community organizations for horticultural students or others interested in part-time work. Younger gardeners may even be interested in trading work for plant divisions.

Recommended reading: Sydney Eddison’s *Gardening for a Lifetime*; Ruth Stout’s out-of-print *How to Have a Green Thumb without an Aching Back*.

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