

When Gardening Gets Tough, the Tough Get Smart

By Rachel Oppedahl

Much as I'd like to believe that I'm capable of the same level of physical exertion now as when I was 30, it just ain't so. But I refuse to let that limitation stop me from gardening. So, I'm always on the lookout for clever ways to get more pleasure, and less pain, out of garden chores. Here are a few tips that really work.

Go Ergonomic. Use tricks and tools to ease the wear and tear on your body. Raised planting beds, especially if they have a wide enough rim to sit on, can spare your low back no end of pain. With or without a ledge, the beds should be no more than four feet wide so it's easy to reach across. If making raised beds from scratch isn't feasible, you can buy simple raised-bed kits. Finally, check out garden supply stores and online retailers for specialized garden stools with wheels, hand tools with ergonomic grips, and other products that make gardening easier.

Consider Different Ways to Garden. Maybe a container garden on your deck makes more sense than dealing with in-ground planting. In addition to ornamental favorites, you can grow lots of veggies and fruit in pots, which means no digging, raking, weeding (well, mostly), or dealing with gophers. Or how about choosing plants—in pots or in the ground—that grow vertically, so you can tend to them and harvest while standing up? Think beans and peas on tepee trellises, apples or grapes espaliered on a fence, or ornamental vines such as clematis, jasmine or morning glory trained to grow in between deck railings.

Make Friends with Natives. The less demanding a plant is, the less work you have to do. Plants that are either native to the foothills or similar environments (for example, Mediterranean) have a much better chance of thriving in your garden without endless water, fertilizers, and pest/disease controls. For an awesome guide to natives, visit the California Native Plant Society's website at www.cnps.org. For information about our local chapter, visit www.sierrafoothillscnps.org.

Pace Yourself and Make Smart Moves. Easier said than done, I know. Once you're in the garden with its never-ending tending (and joys), it's hard to stop. But then the next day, you can barely move. So, instead of a feast-or-famine approach to garden chores, learn to pace yourself. Start by doing five to 10 minutes of gentle stretching to warm up for the work. Switch activities or change position every 20 minutes or so. If you're pulling weeds by hand, alternate so one hand doesn't do all of the work. Take a 10-minute rest break at least once an hour.

Stay Cool and Hydrated. Giving yourself sun stroke or becoming dehydrated is the last thing you want to risk while trying to enjoy gardening. Work outside in the early morning or evening hours when it's cooler. If it's getting hot but you don't want to stop, move to a shadier spot; or go inside and pore over gardening books instead. Always drink plenty of water before, during and after working outside.

Ask for Help. Recently, I've finally started to put my stubbornly self-reliant impulses on hold and ask a trusted friend or two to help me with tasks I really shouldn't try to do by myself. And you know what? These dear friends actually enjoyed the opportunity to help me. Case in point: I no longer have to stare at a 100-foot stand of mostly dead or dying Manzanita on the rise in my backyard, thanks to a group chainsaw session.

Be smart, be safe, and use whatever methods make sense to help you keep your gardening dreams alive.

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UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.