

BACK CARE FOR GARDENERS

Article by backpainexpert.co.uk

One of the most common health complaints suffered by gardeners is back pain. This is hardly surprising as gardening duties usually consist of plenty of bending and stretching and the lifting and moving of heavy objects. However, recurrent back pain, when gardening, has usually come about as the result of an incorrect approach in how you should look after your back when it comes to work that requires a great deal of physical exertion. However, by following a few basic safety guidelines, you can avoid back pain in later years, or, at least, learn to cope with the back pain you already have, without having to give up your beloved gardening.

LIFTING ADVICE

When we try to lift a heavy object, many of us make the mistake of bending at the waist, grasping the load and then straightening up. This places an enormous amount of strain on your back. As well as lifting the load, you are also applying the weight of that load directly to the vertebrae and muscles of your back. This incorrect method of lifting causes more back injuries worldwide than any other. We're all guilty and in later years we all live to regret it. The correct way to lift is to, firstly, bend at the knees in front of the load then, in a squat position, grasp the load firmly with your hands then use your legs, not your back, to push upwards until you're standing upright. Your legs were designed to be able to withstand this kind of load bearing, unlike your back. See how professionals do it or, for an even more obvious example, watch a weightlifter in action to see how much emphasis is placed upon the legs.

USE LIFTING AIDS

Gardening is meant to be enjoyable, not an exertion. So, if you need to haul around heavy pots of soil or bulky, heavy bags of potting compost or manures, use one of the many mechanical aids out there that will save you a lot of pain later. Wheelbarrows, hand trolleys or even calling in a favour from a friend can lighten the load and save you a lot of back trouble. You can also slide the blade of a spade underneath a pot or tub and simply push it along, like a sled, to wherever you want to put it. Don't put saving time above your health. Gardening is not a race against time so don't overload your wheelbarrow and risk putting out your back. Make two or three lighter trips instead.

WEEDING AND PLANTING

Weeding and planting are two areas we tend to neglect when it comes to taking care of our back. Buy a proper kneeling pad for these activities. The ones with the side handles are preferable as they aid you when it is time to stand up. Don't overreach either. This also puts additional strain on your back and it's often a good idea to bear this in mind when it comes to designing and digging your borders and ensuring that areas you need to get to do not involve a lot of stretching to reach them. Do your planting in a kneeling position. Bending down to plant is a further strain on your back muscles. If you already have a back problem, consider planting thick ground covers or use mulches to keep the weeds at bay. This will reduce or even eliminate the need to get down and weed.

KEEPING THINGS AT A MANAGEABLE HEIGHTS

Using raised beds allows for easy reaching across the bed without stretching and provides a height that should eliminate the need to bend. Old sinks, bathtubs, polystyrene boxes and even old bed frames can be adapted into raised beds.

Potting and greenhouse benches should be at elbow height to avoid stooping or reaching when you are working at them. This will be much more comfortable and you'll be able to work better and for longer without being troubled by backache.

DIG FOR GAIN NOT PAIN

Digging is probably one of the biggest causes of backache when gardening. Just like an athlete, you shouldn't just start digging 'cold' and it's advisable to do a few warm up exercises first. This "powers up" the muscles in preparation for the task ahead. Don't dig too much all at once. Spread your digging out into intervals. Dig for half an hour then stop, have a cup of tea or a rest, and then dig again. This allows the muscles in your back to ease and relax. Once you feel a twinge in your back, it is telling you it's time to have a rest. Alternatively, spread the digging out over a few days and intersperse each day's digging with a few less stressful gardening jobs.

PUTTING THE SPARK IN YOUR MOWER

If you already suffer back problems consider switching over to a power driven electric or petrol mower. The same applies to other power driven gardening tools that will make things easier for you. As mentioned earlier, gardening is a hobby to be enjoyed not a chore to be abhorred. With a little due care and attention, you can keep your gardening relatively pain free. When gardening becomes painful, we tend to lose interest. Think about your back in the garden and, with proper care, it will support you through many years of pain free gardening.