

Still time to do some gardening

Gardening can get your breathing and heart rate up, help you burn more calories and improve your cardiovascular system

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Many take up a hobby simply to fill their spare time but gardening is more than that. On the surface, a garden may be a colorful sea, or a source of homegrown vegetables. However, the act itself has numerous health benefits.

Depending on the intensity, gardening can be the equivalent of low-impact aerobics.

"Taking up gardening is an easy way to increase your physical activity," said public health educator for the Onondaga County Health Department, Tara Hammes. She said it's something you can do every day, like walking the dog, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator. "Although gardening may not get you ready to run a marathon," said Hammes, "it gets your breathing and heart rate up, burns more calories and improves your cardiovascular system." It's also a weight-bearing exercise that increases bone density, which is especially important for women, who are susceptible to osteoporosis. Just like with any exercise, Hammes said, gardening can increase your self-esteem, put you in a better mood, and even make you sleep better at night.

"All that digging, weeding, stooping and hauling stuff around really is a good workout," said Ginny Spina, a gardening instructor at the Onondaga/Cortland/Madison County BOCES. Spina said she begins getting ready for gardening in the spring by walking. "If you just run out and start digging, you'll hurt." Although Spina sometimes suffers from a sore back in the winter, she said gardening strengthens her back and keeps her pain-free all summer.

You can overdo it though, which is why Hammes said to listen to your body's cues. "I've never heard of any health benefits from blisters and a sore back, but regular exercise is good for you," said Jan Vanderheide, a vegetable production specialist with the Oswego County Division of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Agency. "If it starts hurting too much, quit," he said.

The number one issue, Vanderheide said, will be the sun. "A good gardening spot is usually exposed to the sun," he said, "so, if you're going to be working in the garden during the late morning or early afternoon, wear sunscreen, or long sleeves, pants, and a hat." Vanderheide said the long sleeves and pants will also help keep away bugs. Spina said she wears a hat to prevent from getting a headache. "Most importantly," both Spina and Vanderheide said, "stay hydrated." Vanderheide said it's very easy to get heat exhaustion.

Another thing to watch out for is your knees. "If your knees are bothered by kneeling, don't do it so much, or do it for short stretches of time," said Vanderheide. You can also invest in kneepads. Spina says for older gardeners, some stores carry a little kneeling stool that has arms on the sides to help

you get up and down.

Another option might be using gardening tools with extended handles. "You need to get tools to fit you," said Vanderheide. "If you're a short person, a long-handled shovel might not fit you, or if you're tall, a short-handled shovel might give you a backache."

The proper footwear should also be a consideration when gardening. Vanderheide advises wearing working shoes. "You'll cut off your toes if you wear sandals," he said. "Wear good-fitting shoes with a relatively hard sole so you can step on a shovel or a spade to get it into the ground."

Since gardening requires a lot of bending, Vanderheide said to remember, "if you're lifting a heavy load, keep your back straight, and bend from your knees."

Digging deeper into the hobby of gardening reveals it's not just good for the body, but for the soul as well. Spina said it's psychologically, mentally and emotionally fulfilling, no matter what size the garden. She advises senior citizens to begin small container gardens. "It's nice to get up in the morning and look to see how everything is, see if there's anything new popping up," said Spina. "You go out in the garden, puddle around, forget your problems after a hard day's work." She said playing in her garden is like therapy. Hammes said the hobby is very task-orientated. "You can see your effort progressing, as can the neighbors and the community."

Horticulturist Danny Carroll said the fulfillment can come from working in the garden as well as relaxing in it. When planning your garden, Carroll advises incorporating plants that bring up childhood memories or tranquil experiences. "I did a garden for people that like the seashore, and though I didn't recreate the ocean, I chose plants that are native on the seashore to recreate the mood," Carroll said.

There are several tips to follow to make your garden as relaxing as possible. Carroll recommends placing the garden in the backyard, out of a traffic pattern and away from distractions. As for the plants in the garden, Carroll said, "Keep it simple." "Too many different plants or objects is distracting," he said, "so if you have one plant you like, use a lot of it, instead of a lot of different plants, which can be unnerving."

Scent is another strong design element, according to Carroll. But just like the work you put into the garden or the plants you use in it, too many smells can give you a headache, he said.

Last, and most importantly, Carroll said water is a necessity in a garden. "Water in the summer is like fire in the winter," he said. It doesn't have to be on a grand scale, though. Carroll said he's made a lot of simple fountains out of urns. "The water creates a focal point in the garden and changes the space completely," said Carroll.