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Question: What do weekend warriors and weekend gardeners have in common?

Answer: The phrase, "Ow! My aching (insert body part here)!"

By Jutta Schneider, MSPT

As a fellow "weekend gardener" with the occasional urge to whip my garden into shape in one short weekend, I firmly believe that gardening is not for wimps! In fact, as a physical therapist, I find that this time of year when I ask my clients how they were hurt, gardening is a common response. The weekend warrior and the weekend gardener both confront many of the same physical hazards: reaching, lifting, twisting, gripping, and bending. The following are some basic preventative guidelines to help avoid some of the more common gardening injuries.

Remember to start out slowly for the first ten minutes to warm your body up for activity. (For example, start with minor weeding before digging out that forsythia bush you've been meaning to move to another location.) A light session of stretching is also a good idea before gardening, followed by a deeper stretching session afterwards. Once you're warmed up, you can pick up the pace for steady continuous gardening. Did you know that the humble gardener who weighs 155 pounds can burn approximately 300 to 600 calories an hour? WOW! That's the same as walking uphill for 60 minutes at a speed of approximately 3.5 miles per hour. And in addition to your improved fitness, you also get the gardener's cornucopia: flowers, vegetables, and a restful and therapeutic sanctuary. It sure beats sweaty gym clothes!

While gardening, try to limit yourself to only 10 or 15 minutes in any one position to prevent stiffness and injury from setting in. It may be tempting to eradicate your entire yard of dandelions in one session, but it's not advisable! A good rule of thumb for most physical activities is to limit yourself to two hours at any given time.

Lastly, observing sound body mechanics cannot be over emphasized. With lifting, this means keeping your spine fairly upright and using your legs to squat. Try gently pulling your belly button in with lifting and bending. This engages the core muscles that act as a girdle for your back. Try to maintain the natural "S-shaped" spinal curves with all gardening. When you do, the spine functions more like a spring and is better able to give with movement.

Avoid long reaches in favor of moving as close to your project as possible (unless, of course, we're talking about stinging nettles and blackberry brambles!). Keep loads manageable and hold them close to your body. Don't forget about all the fancy ergonomic tools that have been spawned by our injured gardening predecessors. Grips with fat handles can help ward off tennis/golfer's elbow and carpal tunnel-type symptoms. A gardening stool can save cranky knees. If lower back problems are limiting you, try long-handled gardening tools and raised beds or container gardening.

The physical and mental benefits of creating your own garden are unbeatable. Just remember, to prevent a trip to the physical therapist on Monday morning, warm-up,

stretch, change positions frequently, and use good body mechanics. Happy, healthy gardening!

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