



Gardening is a favourite activity among older adults. Besides being enjoyable, it provides many health benefits. Some medical conditions and physical disabilities may restrict or prevent older people from participating in this activity, however, with planning and a few changes safe, accessible and pleasant spaces can be created.

The benefits

- Increases levels of physical activity and maintains mobility and flexibility. For seniors who don't have appointments or schedules to keep, it can be easy to become inactive. Gardening is a fun activity that stimulates the body's systems without seeming like exercise.
- Encourages use of all motor skills – walking, reaching and bending – through activities such as planting seeds and taking cuttings.
- Improves endurance if you spend a lot of time in the garden. It also improves strength as you pull weeds and dig in the dirt.
- Reduces stress levels and promotes relaxation, which aids better sleep for improved health.
- Improves mental awareness due to fresh air and helps with concentration and focus.
- Facilitates social interaction, through outings to garden centres and/or chatting with neighbours/passers-by.
- Provides a sense of accomplishment.
- Helps prevent diseases like osteoporosis.

Health considerations

Although there are many benefits you can gain from gardening, there are also things to consider:

- **Skin** – fragile, thinning skin makes older adults susceptible to bumps, bruises, cuts and sunburn.
- **Vision** – changes in the eye lens structure, loss of peripheral vision and generally poorer eyesight can restrict activities.
- **Mental abilities** – mental health, thinking and memory abilities may be affected by dementia and similar conditions and people may become disoriented when away from the familiarity of their home – even in their backyard.
- **Body temperature** – susceptibility to temperature changes and a tendency to dehydrate or suffer from heat exhaustion, are common concerns with outdoor physical activity for older adults.
- **Skeletal** – falls are more common because balance is often not as good. Osteoporosis and arthritis may restrict movement and flexibility. Gardening areas need to be free from sticks, rocks, and other hazards. A cane/walker may also be beneficial.

Gardening for older adults

Modifications

The garden, equipment and tools can all be modified to suit the needs of older adults. Suggestions include:

- Using vertical planting to make garden beds accessible for planting and harvesting – for example wall and trellis spaces.
- Raising garden beds to enable people with physical restrictions to avoid bending and stooping.
- Using retractable hanging baskets, wheelbarrows and containers on castors to make suitable movable and elevated garden beds.
- Finding adaptive tools and equipment – these are available from some hardware shops.
- Using foam, tape and plastic tubing to modify existing tools for a better grip.
- Using lightweight tools and buckets that are easier to handle.
- Providing shaded areas for working in the summer months.
- Having stable chairs and tables to use for comfortable gardening.
- Making sure that there is a tap nearby or consider installing a drip feeder system for easy watering.
- Rearranging the garden into sections. That means having a smaller area that needs tending to on a regular basis, and one area that is a low maintenance zone with hardy native plants that can survive on rain and dew.

Safety

An older person in the garden can remain safe by following these tips:

- Attending to any cuts, bruises or insect bites immediately.
- Taking care in the use of power tools.
- Securing gates and fences if memory loss is an issue.
- Ensuring that paths and walkways are flat, non-slip and uncluttered.
- Warming up before gardening and taking frequent breaks.
- Preventing sun exposure by working in the garden early in the morning or late in the day. Wearing a hat and loose fitting covered clothing and applying sunscreen frequently.
- Wearing protective shoes and gardening gloves.
- Drinking water or juice, and avoiding alcohol.
- Keeping drinks entirely separate from chemicals.
- Storing garden equipment safely.
- Washing hands thoroughly after gardening.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups.
- Local council.
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria, Phone 03 9836 1128.

Gardening and carers

Carers can assist older adults with their gardening, from providing help as they need it, aiding if they become unwell, reminding them to drink plenty of water, and simply ensuring they don't stay out in the heat too long. Carers make it possible for older adults to keep enjoying an active lifestyle.

Sources: Better Health Channel, Gardening for older people, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/gardening-for-older-people>, Carefect Home Care Services, The Benefits of Gardening for Seniors, <http://www.carefecthomecareservices.com/blog/the-benefits-of-gardening-for-seniors>, Goldage, Safety in the garden for older people and the elderly, <http://www.goldage.com.au/safety-in-the-garden-for-older-people-and-the-elderly>, My Ageing Parent, Gardening is good for older people, <https://myageingparent.com/life/keeping-busy/gardening-is-good-for-elderly>, Burke's Backyard, Don's Top Six Low Maintenance Plants, <https://www.burkesbackyard.com.au/fact-sheets/in-the-garden/flowering-plants-shrubs/dons-top-six-low-maintenance-plants/>

Best low maintenance plants

Lomandra.

An easy-care, Australian native with narrow, strap-like leaves. It forms tussocks to around one metre high, and has creamy flowers on spiny stems.

Camellia.

Camellias have attractive, glossy leaves and gorgeous white, pink or red flowers and once established they will perform well for many years.

Japanese sacred bamboo.

An evergreen, upright shrub with bamboo-like stems, attractive foliage, creamy white flowers and bright red berries.

Bird of paradise.

This plant has spoon-shaped, grey-green leaves and magnificent, orange and blue flowers.

Oleander.

Native to the Mediterranean region, many varieties, with flowers in a range of colours from purest white through to light pinks, apricots and deep reds.

Disclaimer: This information is not intended to replace medical advice from a health professional. Readers are urged to seek advice from a qualified health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions. Bapcare is a customer focused, faith centred and purpose driven organisation working across Victoria and Tasmania, providing care to the community for more than 70 years.