

# Information Sheet

## 20 Gardening

For many people of all ages, gardening provides pleasure, exercise and a reason for going outside. Even if you get little enjoyment from your garden, you may want to keep it tidy. Getting older need not stop you gardening but it may make it more difficult. There are no general rules to follow but we hope that the ideas in this information sheet will help you to keep the garden you want.

This information sheet was produced with the generous help of Thrive, the national charity promoting the use of gardening and horticulture for training and employment, therapy and health.

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## What do you want from your garden?

As a first step, it is a good idea to work out what you want from your garden. You may want a garden with maximum display but the minimum of effort on your part. Or perhaps you view your garden as a pleasurable hobby and will spend a lot of time in it. Alternatively, you may just want your garden kept neat and tidy.

Having considered what you want from your garden, it might be helpful to re-design it to suit your needs. Carefully re-designing your garden does not have to be difficult and can make a real difference. It could save you work and unnecessary strain in the long run, as well as improving accessibility and preventing accidents.

## Planning a garden to suit you

The first thing to consider is accessibility. Your garden should be easy to get to from your house and easy to move around in. Safety is very important, so you should have level paths and non-slip surfaces and limit other hazards and obstacles.

Security is another issue to bear in mind. Prickly hedges, fences and lighting can help to protect your home from intruders. However, sheds can be easy targets for burglars, so make sure you fit good locks on yours. Garden tools can be used by burglars to break into houses, so make sure that tools are locked away and secure. Take them inside if you don't have a secure shed or garden store cupboard.

Think about how to get the most pleasure out of your garden, taking into account your physical ability and the amount of time you want to spend in it. You can enjoy your garden from inside your home as well as outside, creating areas with a lot of interest in the parts of your garden visible from your windows. You can encourage wildlife such as butterflies and birds by choosing plants that they like and providing a bird bath or table.

It is possible to reduce the amount of physical work, such as bending and lifting, that you need to do. Bring the soil to a height that suits you by creating raised beds, or use long-handled, light tools. You could take a folding seat out with you so that you can sit down to work, being careful to place the seat in a stable position.

Plant hardy perennials rather than annuals or concentrate on small areas and tubs and containers. Many modern plant varieties can be easily grown in containers as well as in ordinary soil. For example, dwarf tomatoes are very easy to grow inside or outside and produce large crops. You can even grow some small trees in tubs.

Creating your ideal garden can be quite expensive, but there are ways to keep the costs down. For example, if you need to mulch your beds, you could use grass cuttings, straw and newspaper as a cheaper alternative to bark. You may be able to share the cost of materials, tools and equipment with friends and neighbours. If you are paying to have work done, always shop around and try to get at least three quotes. Contact the charity **Thrive** for helpful tips on cutting costs (contact details on page 10).

## Tools to help in the garden

If you are finding physical work like digging, raking or pruning a struggle, you may just need to find the right tool. Perhaps you need a trowel which is extra long or light enough for you to manage, or maybe an arm support attached to your garden fork would help.

There are a wide range of tools available to suit all needs. Ask your friends what they use and, if you can, go to a garden centre and ask to try out the tools. You could also see if there is a local gardening club that can help to demonstrate tools.

In general, you should aim to buy as high-quality a tool as possible, making sure it is well balanced, sharp and light. Keep all tools clean and oiled so that they work easily in the soil. Thrive produces a free information sheet, *Tips for Easier Gardening*, which gives guidance on what to look for, including a list of tools. Thrive's contact details are on page 10.

You can also make or adapt many tools at home by converting simple domestic items. Plastic squash containers with built-in handles can be cut down to make a light and strong scoop. Knives, forks, children's sand spades and paint scrapers can all be useful. If you have a weak grip or a tool's handle is too small, it can be useful to pad the handle out with foam.

Adapting tools to your specific needs can sometimes require a certain amount of ingenuity or engineering skill. Help of this kind is sometimes available from an organisation called the Rehabilitation Engineering Movement Advisory Panel (REMAP). REMAP comprises groups of voluntary engineers who, with the help of therapists, devise aids that are not available on the commercial market. For more information see Useful contacts on page 10.

## Mobility in the garden

Various mobility aids can help you to move around in your garden: for example, rollators and walking frames. Some walking frames have seats and tables built into them, which can be very useful. You may want to use an organiser belt to carry small tools, but bear in mind that you will be carrying the weight around with you, so don't overload it.

It is important to plan your garden so that you can get the most out of it, whatever your mobility needs. The following are some of the things you may want to think about when designing your garden.

- Are your paths wide enough for you to move comfortably along with your stick or walking frame or wheelchair?
- Is there somewhere in the garden where you can sit or perch to give yourself a break?
- If your garden is on a slope or has steps, carefully placed handrails or posts can help you to move around more easily.
- Would you find it easier to work in your garden if your flower/vegetable beds were raised to a more comfortable height?
- If you have a shed or greenhouse, is the door easy for you to open and wide enough if you use a wheelchair or a walker?

## Safety in the garden

Safety is very important in the garden. There are some basic rules that should help you to avoid accidents and injuries. Remember, keeping the garden tidy and free of obstacles goes a long way to making it safer.

- Try to make sure you have non-slip paving that provides a good grip.
- Keep paths clean and clear. Uneven paving and plants overgrowing the paths can cause falls. Leaves left on paths can become slippery when wet.
- Be careful of your eyes where there are overhanging trees and shrubs and unprotected canes or stakes.
- Always use tools carefully and place them in a safe position when you put them to one side.
- You should never use electrical equipment, for example: a lawnmower or hedge trimmer, in wet weather. Use a residual current device (RCD), which will cut the flow of electricity if you accidentally cut through the flex.
- If you have to use a ladder, make sure it is in good condition, standing at a safe angle and anchored at its base. Never use a ladder when you are on your own; it is far safer to have someone with you who can hold it steady.
- Listen to your body. If a particular task is causing you pain, you should stop. Switch between different jobs to avoid repetitive strain injury.

You may want to check when you had your last tetanus injection. You should have a booster every ten years. Tetanus is a serious infection of the nervous system. It is caused by bacteria which live in the soil and in dirt and can infect minor cuts. Visit your doctor or practice nurse if you think you might need an injection.

## Gardening indoors

If going outside is difficult for you, there may still be other ways to enjoy gardening activities. Window boxes, tubs and hanging baskets can be made and planted indoors for display outside.

Cuttings or indoor plants which root easily in water can be placed in a clear container filled with pebbles or marbles and water. Using a transparent container means that you can follow the development of the roots as they grow.

You can also create an indoor garden of houseplants (grouped together on gravel or capillary matting to reduce watering) which gives year-long interest, or grow houseplants in interesting containers.

## How to get going

When you do venture out into the garden to do some work it is important to prepare well.

- Make sure that you plan your gardening activity. Gather together everything you need to save yourself endless trips back and forth to the house or tool shed.
- Always wrap up well.
- Be realistic about your own limitations and don't overdo things. Plan to do a little at a time, taking plenty of breaks. Always stop before you get too tired.
- It is best to try to tidy up as you go along, but remember to save some energy for a final clean-up once you finish working.
- Perhaps, most important of all, do some gentle warm-up exercises (bending, stretching and flexing) before you go into the garden. This will help to prevent too much strain being put on your body while gardening. Stretch after a long gardening session too; this will help to stop you feeling sore and stiff.

You may need some help re-designing your garden, getting the right kind of advice, finding the funds for tools or plants, or hiring someone to do the big jobs such as tree pruning which you may be unable to manage. The following sections of this information sheet give details of some organisations that may be able to help.

## Information on making gardening easier

Thrive is a good first port of call for information and guidance on many aspects of making gardening easier and more enjoyable. It has a comprehensive advice service and publishes a large number of leaflets on easier gardening, as well as a

quarterly magazine for sight-impaired gardeners (available in Braille, Moon and on cassette). See page 10 for its contact details.

Thrive also has an 'easy gardening' website, funded by the National Lottery Charities Board. The site features a range of ideas for easier gardening, including information on tools, and invites users to exchange tips.

### Information for disabled people

Gardeners wanting general advice on disability can contact their local Disability Information and Advice Line (DIAL). DIALs provide free, impartial and confidential information and advice and, occasionally, practical help for disabled people. They are run by people with direct personal experience of disability. For details of your nearest branch look in the phone book or see Useful contacts on page 10.

Your local horticultural college and the gardening press may also have information to make gardening easier.

## Hiring private contractors

For jobs that you cannot manage by yourself, or tasks requiring professional expertise, such as tree surgery, you may decide to hire a private contractor to carry out the work. Most people offering gardening services are reputable. But unfortunately there are some unscrupulous people around who could try to take advantage of you.

A messy, overgrown garden could make you a target for rogue traders, bogus callers or con artists who will try to cheat you out of money or steal from you. Be careful if someone comes to your door uninvited, offering gardening services. Never let a stranger into your home unless you are sure that they are genuine and you have checked that they are who they say they are. Here are some other tips on how to avoid being cheated by dishonest contractors:

- ask your friends or neighbours if they can recommend someone to you;
- find out how much a job will cost **before** the contractor starts work and get a written quote from them;

- never agree to have a job done on the spot by people who call without an appointment;
- give yourself time to think before you agree to an offer and get quotes from a few different gardeners or contractors;
- never pay someone cash before the job is finished; and
- never let workmen know that you keep cash at home and never accept a lift from them to go to the bank to collect money.

If you think you have been targeted by an unscrupulous contractor contact **Consumer Direct** on 0845 404 0506 which will advise you and, if necessary, notify your local Trading Standards department. If you live in Wales and would prefer to talk to a Welsh speaking advisor, tel: 08454 04 05 05. If you have been threatened or harassed call the police on **999**.

See our free information sheets *Avoiding Scams* and *Buying Goods and Services at Home and on the Internet*, for more information on how to avoid falling victim to cons and scams.

## Funds

The Gardening for Disabled Trust provides practical and financial help to older and disabled gardeners. Write to the Trust for details of its grants, see page 10 for contact details.

Your local Lions or Rotary Club may be able to help with large-scale expenses such as paving a garden for wheelchair use. You should be able to find its contact details in your local phone book.

## Practical help

Some Age Concern groups offer voluntary help with gardening. For details of your local group look in your phone book or contact:

### **Age Concern England**

Astral House  
1268 London Road  
London SW16 4ER  
Tel: 0800 00 99 66  
Web: [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)

It may also be worth contacting your local **Volunteer Centre** to see whether anyone on its books can help with gardening tasks. Contact the relevant organisation below for details of your local Volunteer Centre.

Or if you have internet access, you can use the Volunteer Centre 'finder' by clicking 'VC finder' in the 'Get involved' section at [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk)

### **Volunteering England**

Regents Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL  
Tel: 0845 305 6979  
Web: [www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)

### **Wales Council for Voluntary Action**

Baltic House  
Mount Stuart Square  
Cardiff CF10 5FH  
Tel: 029 2043 1700  
Web: [www.wcva.org.uk](http://www.wcva.org.uk)

### **Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action**

61 Duncairn Gardens  
Belfast BT15 2GB  
Tel: 028 9087 7777  
Web: [www.nicva.org](http://www.nicva.org)

### **Volunteer Development Scotland**

Stirling Enterprise Park  
Stirling FK7 7RP  
Tel: 01786 479 593  
Web: [www.vds.org.uk](http://www.vds.org.uk)

Scout, Guide and other youth groups can sometimes offer basic gardening help. Local allotment societies or gardening clubs may occasionally provide practical help as well as guidance.

## Useful contacts

### **Able Products Ltd**

Kilda Way  
Perth PH1 3XS  
Tel: 01738 639222  
Web: [www.ablegardener.co.uk](http://www.ablegardener.co.uk)

Able Gardener is an organisation which is specifically for disabled and older gardeners with reduced mobility. It can supply lightweight garden implements and other garden accessories, including Easi-Grip tools, which are specially designed for people with less grip and dexterity.

### **DIAL UK**

St Catherine's  
Tickhill Road  
Doncaster DN4 8QN  
Tel: 01302 310 123  
Web: [www.dialuk.info](http://www.dialuk.info)

### **Gardening for Disabled Trust**

PO Box 285  
Tunbridge Wells  
Kent TN2 9JD  
Web: [www.gardeningfordisabledtrust.org.uk](http://www.gardeningfordisabledtrust.org.uk)

### **REMAP**

D9 Chaucer Business Park  
Kemsing  
Sevenoaks TN15 6YU  
Tel: 0845 130 0456  
Web: [www.remap.org.uk](http://www.remap.org.uk)

### **Thrive**

The Geoffrey Udall Centre  
Beech Hill  
Reading RG7 2AT  
Tel: 0118 988 5688  
Web: [www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk)  
[www.carryongardening.org.uk](http://www.carryongardening.org.uk)

Please enclose a large SAE, with a stamp, for replies.

## Useful reading

*Gardening is for Everyone* by Audrey Cloet & Chris Underhill, published by Souvenir Press. Available from Thrive priced £8 inc. P&P (address on page 7).

*Gardening and Arthritis* is a free booklet published by the Arthritis Research Campaign (ARC). To order a copy write to ARC, Copeman House, St Mary's Court, St Mary's Gate, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 7TT. Tel: 0870 850 5000. Web: [www.arc.org.uk](http://www.arc.org.uk)

*Landscape Design for Elderly and Disabled People* by Jane Stoneham and Peter Thoday, published by Garden Art Press. ISBN: 1 870 67320 4, priced at £34.50.

## For further information contact:

Information Resources Team  
Help the Aged  
207–221 Pentonville Road  
London N1 9UZ  
Tel: 020 7278 1114

If you have access to the Internet you can download our information sheets and advice leaflets by logging on to: [www.helptheaged.org.uk](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk)

**SeniorLine** is the free telephone advice and information service run by Help the Aged for older people. Trained advice workers offer free, confidential and impartial advice about:

- welfare and disability benefits
- care at home
- residential care
- housing options and adaptations
- access to health and community services.

Freephone: **0808 800 6565**

Textphone: **0800 26 96 26**

**9am to 4pm, Monday to Friday**

If you are in **Northern Ireland**, contact **SeniorLine** on **0808 808 7575**.

IS(NO)20  
December 1992 (KW)  
Last revised: March 2009 (SV)  
Next update due: February 2010

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