

Green fingers - and a painful back

Thousands of gardeners will seek treatment this summer for aching backs, strained wrists and swollen knees, often caused by being overzealous. Few people think of gardening as exercise, yet more than 400,000 gardeners need medical attention every year after injuring themselves lifting, weeding for too long or wrestling with stubborn shrubs.

Mark Bender, physiotherapist to the British Davis Cup tennis team, says: "Most gardening activities are fairly rigorous and gardeners sustain the same injuries as sports people. Pulling up a shrub, for example, can cause a back injury that's common among front row rugby players."

Problems arise when people launch into gardening after a winter of relative inactivity and fail to warm up, move properly or avoid heavy loads.

Gwyn Owen, professional adviser to the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, points out that gardening is hard work: "Few people are physically prepared for it. Physiotherapists see people with injuries that could be avoided by stretching and warming up." Keeping fit will also protect the spine. "During exercise, people strengthen their diaphragm, pelvic floor, lower back and abdominal muscles," says Bender. "All these areas should protect the back from strain during gardening. Increased stamina also prevents muscle fatigue and consequential strain on the spine."

Even a seasoned gardener such as Alan Titchmarsh, presenter of *Ground Force*, has to play it safe. "I avoid digging for too long and lift things carefully, keeping my back straight and bending my knees," he says. Titchmarsh also increases his stamina with regular walks. "Don't lift more than you can cope with comfortably, limit the time you spend on strenuous activities, keep fit and you'll be fine," he says.

Tips for pain-free gardeners

- Stretching:** do back exercises before and after gardening to mobilise and strengthen the spine.
- Weeding and planting:** gripping, twisting and pulling can inflame tendons. Stop to massage wrists and lower arms. Lock hands with palms facing out and stretch them over the head, behind the back and out in front. Sustained bending can cause muscle spasm in the lower back. Move close in or use a long-handled implement. Cushion the knees with pads. Take a break or change activity every 20 minutes.
- Lifting:** keep your back straight, bend your knees, look ahead and hug the load close to your body. Test the weight of something by lifting one corner — if it's heavy, roll it or push it. Divide a heavy load and make several trips using a wheelbarrow or trolley.
- Digging and shovelling:** stand with feet shoulder-width apart for stability. Use a long-handled spade. Let your legs support you, not your back. Shovel small amounts.
- Pulling up shrubs:** crouch close to the plant and hold it firmly, feet shoulder-width apart. Hold your head up, bend your knees and straighten legs, keeping the back straight. Lean away from the object as you pull.
- Sweeping, hoeing and hedging:** stick to a forward and backwards action when sweeping and hoeing. Use small, controlled movements when trimming hedges; don't overreach.
- Equipment:** choose lightweight implements and think about your posture. When using a hover mower, for example, don't swing from the waist; turn your whole body in line with the mower. Don't overload wheelbarrows. If in doubt when starting petrol-powered equipment, ask for help.

Heather Beresford

- Free leaflets on lower back exercises and safe gardening are available from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy — www.csp.org.uk, or 020 7306 6620
- Mark Bender MCSP SRP, Sports and Spinal Injury Clinics 020 7371 7666