

Aging in Place: Home Maintenance and Household Fun

Gardening Adaptations for Senior Adults

Introduction

As a person ages, he or she experiences many changes. Some of these are normal aging processes while others are a result of disease or illness. Regardless of the cause, these changes impact a person's physical, emotional and cognitive abilities as well as social roles. Besides being one of America's most popular hobbies, gardening can be therapeutic and enhances creativity. Gardening also relieves stress and provides a natural way to exercise and burn calories.



However, many of the changes involved in aging must be addressed by modifications in gardening practices, situations and tools. The following chart lists changes that occur with age, the impacts of the changes, and the gardening adaptations that can result in continued participation.

Changes Caused by Aging	Impacts	Gardening Adaptations
Cognitive		
Concept development may decrease if the person is not active and social. Alzheimer's disease is more likely, resulting in loss of short-term memory.	It becomes more difficult to learn new skills and to remember recent activities.	The garden can be kept simple with less confusing plantings. Plants that trigger memories can be planted. A distinctive and familiar focal point allows for easier orientation and wayfinding.
Reaction time increases.	The learning pace slows. Accidents with power tools are more likely.	Avoid the use of power tools. Allow plenty of time for gardening activities, keeping the pace leisurely.

Changes Caused by Aging	Impacts	Gardening Adaptations
Physical		
<p>Vision: The lens thickens, yellows and becomes opaque.</p>	<p>Reduced clarity. Blue, violet and green harder to see. Depth perception is diminished.</p>	<p>Paint tools a bright color. Use larger seed or pelletized seed. Grow plants with more tactile and olfactory stimulation. Use vertical planting. Create smooth-surfaced paths.</p>
<p>Muscular and skeletal: There is reduced agility, balance and strength and an increase in tremors and broken bones.</p>	<p>Difficulty lifting and moving objects. Falling is more likely. Gardening becomes more difficult.</p>	<p>Raised beds reduce the need to bend or kneel. The edges of raised beds can provide a place to sit while gardening. Stools provide an intermediate step between standard gardening and raised beds. Adaptive tools with better leverage and improved grips help make gardening easier.</p>
<p>Temperature adaptability: The body does not adjust as quickly or as well to temperature extremes and changes.</p>	<p>High and low temperatures are not tolerated as well. Hyperthermia or heatstroke is more likely. Heat exhaustion caused by loss of body water and salt is likely. Sunburn, eczema, dermatitis and infections increase.</p>	<p>Garden early in the morning or late in the day. Drink water and juice and avoid alcoholic beverages. Shower frequently or splash water on the body. Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothes that cover exposed skin. Wear a hat. Apply sunscreen. Eat light meals. Discuss heat-related problems that may be complicated by medications with a physician. Wear gloves. Soak cuts and punctures in a mild salt solution (1 teaspoon per cup of water) until scab forms.</p>
<p>Disease and chronic conditions: arthritis and rheumatism, heart disease, kidney function</p>	<p>Strength decreases and pain increases. The person tires easily. Urination increases in frequency.</p>	<p>Adaptive tools combined with light, easily worked soil allow gardening activities to continue. Indoor and container gardening projects are more appropriate. Frequent resting periods and a cool place to rest are needed. Bathroom facilities should be near the garden.</p>

Changes Caused by Aging	Impacts	Gardening Adaptations
Societal Roles		
Sense of security and safety is decreased.	This increases the level of fear of outside events and accidents.	Gardening activities should be in a safe place that provides a sense of security. Fences and walls provide security. Gardening with other people provides security and safety.
Family roles change. Economically the elderly person becomes more dependent and loses control of many aspects of life. Family and friends may move or die, isolating the person. Self-esteem and self-confidence are reduced.	This can result in aggressive behavior, isolation, regression or depression.	Gardening activities should be kept low in cost. The gardener should be given control over his or her area of the garden or have his or her own plants to care for. The gardener should be allowed to express individuality while working within a group. In groups, a committee structure can be used to make policies and solve problems. Social activities associated with the garden should be encouraged. Allow gardeners to teach others. Inter-generational activities are particularly effective.

Resources

Sources of adaptive tools adaptability, Post Office Box 515, Colchester, CT 06415
 Lehman Hardware and Appliances, 4779 Kidron Road, Post Office Box 41, Kidron, OH 44636
 Mellingers, Inc., 2310 West South Range, North Lima, OH 44452
 Park Seed Co., Cokesbury Road, Greenwood, SC 29647
 Walt Nicke Co., 36 McLeod Lane, Post Office Box 433, Topfield, MA 01983
 W. Atlee Burpee & Co., 300 Park Avenue, Warminster, PA 18974

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