

ADAPTATIONS IN GARDENING

USED IN LOCAL NURSING HOMES
CAN BE THERAPEUTIC FOR YOU

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“Gardening has been used for hundreds of years to help maintain physical and emotional wellbeing and is now being used in several senior living facilities in Bedford to help improve physical, psychological and social well-being for residents. Horticulture therapy, another term for therapeutic gardening has been introduced by the Bedford Master Gardeners to Bedford Nursing Home, Oakwood Health and Rehabilitation, Campbell Rest Home, and Bentley Commons in Lynchburg. Adaptations in the garden, gardening techniques, and plants make gardening possible for many people who thought they would not experience the joy of gardening again. These same techniques can be applied in your garden.



Extension Master Gardeners beside raised bed
at Bedford Nursing Home in VA

Even for the able bodied, Americas favorite pastime of gardening has many challenges such as the usual garden design of long rows at ground level; garden tools with heavy, long hard handles; problems with manual dexterity, such as weak grip or arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome and weakness associated with chronic illness; lack of confidence and knowledge and declining visual acuity. However, everyone can get rewards from gardening such as improved confidence and self-esteem; feelings of well-being; nutrition, knowledge and enjoyment.

Gene Rothert of the Chicago Botanic Gardens concisely sums up the job of providing horticultural therapy in three parts, "Adapt the garden, adapt the gardener, and adapt the plant materials." This is exactly what the Bedford Master Gardeners have done.

For many individuals, walking, bending, stooping and reaching are no longer options in gardening. If the gardener can't get down to the garden, bring the garden up to the gardener. Use planters, containers and raised beds. In the therapeutic gardens at Bedford Nursing Home and Bentley Commons, Master Gardeners built raised beds for residents to garden while sitting in a chair, or standing. At Oakwood and Campbell Rest Home, residents garden in containers.

Raised beds and containers are best adapted to annual, compact crops that don't grow taller than two feet because permanent plantings are vulnerable to winter injury and the typical reach of the gardener is limited to two feet. Even full-sized bush-type vegetables can grow in containers of at least 18 inches diameter. Gardening in raised beds and containers has the advantage of less plant disease, less weeds, and early warming for early planting. At the senior living facilities in Bedford where Master Gardeners developed therapeutic gardens, residents plant a spring garden such as lettuce, spinach and radishes, a summer garden of flowers, fruit such as strawberries, and vegetables such as sweet potatoes and beans, and a fall garden of flowers and greens.

Planting bags and hanging baskets are sometimes used to help adapt the garden to the gardener. Their care is not much different from any other container, however, they may require more frequent watering.

Planting techniques can also be used to help the gardener maximize benefit and minimize effort. Intensive gardening is a planting technique of close planting to maximize space. Interplanting is a technique of growing two or more types of vegetables in the same place at the same time.

Succession planting is planting something new in spots vacated by spent plants. Trellising or caging uses vertical space, leaving soil space around these plants for more plants.

Master Gardeners recommend some techniques to adapt the gardener so gardening is easier. These techniques include:

- Exercises to tone and relax muscles before, during and after gardening
- Use the right equipment
- Dress in a way that protects them from injury: brimmed hat, lightweight, light colored, long sleeved shirt, and gloves
- Take a break every half-hour or switch to another activity
- Keep the work area safe
- If using pesticides, directions on the label must be followed and cautions heeded.
- Never handle wildlife, alive or dead

Good ergonomic garden tools can make gardening tasks easier. Padding the handles of garden tools makes them easier to grip. Pipe insulation makes a good padding for long handled tools. Match the tool you use to the job. Most people use tools that are too big for them, thinking it will ease the work. Whenever you can, use a small shovel, rake, spade or pitch fork. That way you're lifting less weight. Pad Profusely. Use tools with padded or thicker handles to protect the smaller joints in your hands. Kneeling pads and garden benches can support your back and joints. Padded hand tools also reduce the strain on your hands and arms.



The "noodle bean" (aka yard long bean)
A healthy giant with purple bean pods

The work of gardening can be reduced by careful selection of plants. Plants that like warm soil, such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, peanuts, melons, and okra will thrive in higher beds where the sun can strike the sides of the bed and warm the soil. Plants that like cool soil such as lettuce, potatoes, cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower will do better in lower beds where soil temperatures are cooler.

Herbs and small fruits such as strawberries grow well in containers. While bush type fruit such as blackberries may be grown in containers, they require severe pruning which may reduce their production. Always consider the amount of work required before choosing plants. For example, some perennials and bulbs require regular division; some woody plants require regular pruning. Care in choosing plants can reduce the labor of gardening.

Even in the 'off-season' (winter months) there are many activities related to gardening that can be therapeutic. For example, in December, make centerpieces using greenery from the garden or woods; add some glitter, tinsel, or spray on snow to make it even brighter. In the winter, force bulbs or try growing herbs in small containers in the window sill. Their green sight and pleasant smells will help improve any gloomy day.

You can use the adaptations that the Bedford Master Gardeners are using in the local therapeutic gardening programs to make your gardening more fun and less work.”

Additional sources of information on therapeutic gardening:

- Bedford Extension office 540-586-7675
- <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/HORT/HORT-66/HORT-66.html> “Therapeutic Gardening”

For information on how to become a Master Gardener:

- Bedford Extension office 540-586-7675
- www.bedfordmastergardeners.org

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