

5 FUN WAYS TO GET FIT WITH GARDENING

Turn your yard and garden into a personal fitness center! A garden can help you grow vegetables for your family and help you grow a healthier body at the same time. Visit www.gardenfitness.com for even more ideas.

Warm up with a walk

Research shows that 30 to 45 minutes of active gardening can give you the same benefits as other exercise routines. Warm muscles are more flexible and less likely to get hurt. Start with a brisk walk (5 - 10 minutes) to warm up. This will give you time to plan your gardening projects for the day. Mowing grass can work too, especially if you use a push mower (which is better for the air).

Stretch carefully

After a warm-up, stretching is most important. Safe stretching uses slow, controlled movements. You hold the position for 30 seconds (no bouncing). Garden stretches use trees, fences, tools and the ground for support. For example, lie back on the ground with knees bent. Slowly raise and lower both arms to the ground behind your head.

Flex your muscles

Once your muscles are warmed and stretched, you can do the heavy lifting. Start slowly and build up as your muscles get stronger during the season. Muscle building in the garden can include everything from squats for legs and wall pushups for arms to lifting tools, pots and bags. Proper positioning prevents injuries. Check the Web site listed above for photos on safe strength building.

Balance your load

Balance the time you work in different positions - sitting, standing or kneeling. Balance strength on both sides of your body. Do this by using both your right and left arms for raking, hoeing and shoveling. Also, carry equal loads in both hands. You can walk a straight line heel-to-toe, stand on one foot or do side leg raises. Always use a wall, fence or tree for support if you need it.

Reduce your stress

Gardening should never be all work and no play. Many families find their gardens to be perfect places to think, meditate or pray. Here are two tips to stay cool as a cucumber while gardening. First, water yourself as well as your plants. Keep a bottle of cold water close at hand. Second, wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen, especially between 10 AM and 4 PM.