

Dr. David's

top 10 gardening tips



During his 30 years of practice in Chardon and Mayfield Village, OH, rheumatologist and gardening enthusiast David R. Mandel, MD, has unearthed quite a few strategies for tending your plot without feeling stiff and sore afterward. Here, "Dr. David" shares his secrets.

I've enjoyed gardening for most of my life, as have many of my patients. And when the weather turns warmer, it's a common topic of discussion: what tools to use, how to get started, and ways to minimize pain and stiffness. Over the years, patients have shared the difficulties of gardening with arthritis pain. But they've also shared their strategies for overcoming these challenges, as well as their joy at being able to continue doing the hobby they love. Here are some favorite tips my staff and I have learned from our patients. I hope they provide inspiration for growing your own garden!

Prepare before heading outside

1 Plan your fun!

Head to a gardening center and look for new easy-care plants to grow. Or get creative by combining vegetables and flowers in the same area, which cuts down on the time spent lugging tools and hauling dirt or water. Another option: Position high-maintenance plants closer to your water source and where you store your tools.

2 Ask yourself this question.

What is my No. 1 goal for today? Sometimes it's best to prioritize your tasks and take on just one each day, particularly if you're experiencing a flare of arthritis pain. This will help you avoid fatigue while giving you the satisfaction of completing a gardening activity.

3 Loosen up.

Stretching helps you work more comfortably and even a bit longer, since it increases flexibility and range of motion in your joints. You should continue to stretch when you're done to prevent stiffness later on. Easy moves to try include arm, shoulder, wrist and ankle circles. Ask your doctor to recommend the best stretches for you.



Gather your tools

4 Invest in knee and elbow pads.

Buy ones that fit snugly and feel firm yet flexible. These are particularly helpful during tasks that require a lot of kneeling or bending, such as planting bulbs or weeding.

5 Find a seat.

Keep a lightweight, comfortable chair nearby so you can give your joints a break when possible.

6 Shield your hands.

Wear thick gloves with extra padding. If you have arthritis in your thumbs or fingers, wear splints to protect these delicate joints.

7 Think light and wide.

Use tools that are lightweight with handles that are wide and long, which makes them easier to hold. You can improve the grip of your current tools by wrapping them with foam tubing or grip tape (found online or in the hardware section).

» WEB EXTRA!

Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Try one of these RA-friendly outdoor activities at HealthMonitor.com/RAOutside

Work smarter, not harder

8 Let your body pick the pace.

We accomplish more when we respond to our body's pain signals by slowing down or even stopping. Conserve your energy by switching positions, taking breaks to sit down or stretching for 10 minutes.

9 Bring the garden to you.

Working in raised garden beds (a good rule of thumb is 34 inches off the ground) or with lightweight containers at waist height makes it easier to care for your plants.

This is particularly helpful if you have arthritis of the spine or lower leg pain related to spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal column).

10 Tap an expert—or a friend.

Ask your doctor to suggest a physical therapist who can show you how to do gardening tasks without pain and fatigue. Or find a companion to share in the fun. For example, if kneeling causes pain, dig holes with a long-handled spade while your friend does the planting. 🌱

Pulling weeds?

To prevent hand stiffness, occasionally flex your fingers backward and then forward into a loose fist, says John Gallucci Jr., of JAG Physical Therapy in West Orange, NJ. Or use one hand to gently pull back the fingers on the other one.