

# Correct Gardening Techniques

Most gardeners look forward to that first beautiful weekend in spring. And as a physiotherapist, I can usually tell when this magical time came because my list of patients increases. People complain of sore, swollen hands, tender elbows and shoulders, and of course, back pain. Doing the same motion repeatedly causes problems, especially when you work in an awkward position and use force. But what exactly is happening when you are digging, weeding, pruning and trimming?

## What are you doing that can be so potentially harmful?

1. Using shovels, spades and forks involves lifting. A bent-over position forces you to carry the weight of your own back as well as the load at the end of your shovel. Your back has to bear all of the effort and weight.
2. When you work with rakes or hoes, you use the combined movements of pushing and pulling. Your back bends and your wrists assume an awkward position. This stretches the tendons and compresses the tissues in your hands. When the task is repetitive, this handgrip position can cause blisters and carpal tunnel syndrome.
3. When working with rakes, weed cutters, and shovels, you use a twisting action. The hand position used also requires you to bend forward. This bend and twist action places considerable pressure on your spine, putting your back muscles and soft tissues at risk for injury. An example of this is your shoveling a load of dirt and then twisting to deposit it at your other side. Back pain can be the result.

## Prevent problems before they happen. Try these suggestions:

- Avoid staying in one position for a long time and stop and stretch occasionally. If the work requires repetitive actions, take frequent breaks. Give your muscles and joints a rest.
- When lifting, bend knees and keep the object close to you. Shift your feet when turning instead of twisting from your spine. Use carts, wagons or wheelbarrows to carry the weight.
- Prevent awkward positioning of your wrists. Devices are available that attach to your gardening tools to alter the handgrip.
- Use your whole arm for extra leverage to avoid pressuring your wrists. Look for ergonomically designed hand tools to give a better mechanical advantage.
- Dress warmly in cold, damp weather and insulate grips on metal tools (otherwise blood flow in your hands may be reduced).
- Do stretching exercises before you garden. Shoulder rolls and shoulder shrugs, hand and arm circles, and shoulder and back stretches are all helpful. For specific advice, ask a physiotherapist. **And remember, respect pain. Your body knows when to stop.**

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