

# Adapting Garden Tools to Overcome Physical Challenges

*E. Throckmorton and J. Powell*

No matter what your disability is, you can still garden if you use the right tools.

Depending on their physical problems, gardeners can use tools as is or with some adaptations. Tools can also be altered to fit a need. So, even if you have back, hip, leg, knee, arm, or hand problems, you can still garden.

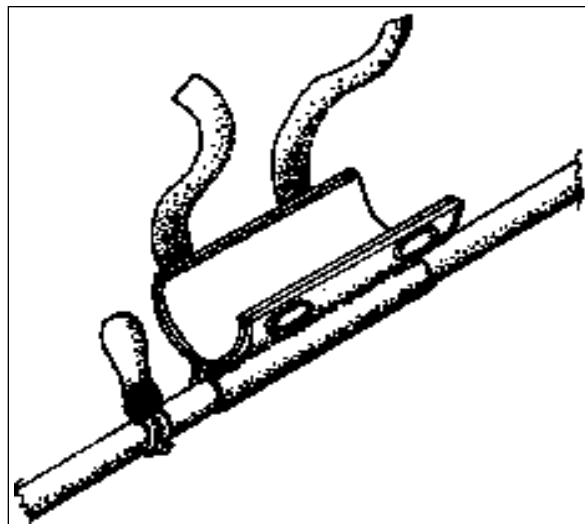
## Back Problems

Bending and lifting are usually difficult for people with back problems. Try these suggestions:

- *Keep your back straight when digging.* Stay close to the blade when pushing the shovel in to the soil. Do not overload.
- *Plastic handle extenders* improve your leverage and keep you from having to bend over too far. (These are available from Gardens for All, 180 Flynn Avenue., Burlington, VT 04501; (802) 863-1308.)
- *Long-handled tools* are also available in many hardware stores. Bulb planters with handles 35 inches long can be used for planting both bulbs and small plants. These are available from W. Atlee Burpee Co., Riverside, CA 92502.
- *Make a planting device* from a length of polyvinyl pipe (2 or 3 inches in diameter) available in home repair stores. Cut it to 3 or 4 feet, depending on how tall the user is. Sharpen one end so it can be used to draw a furrow in the prepared earth for planting. Drop seeds at regular intervals through the pipe to provide the seed spacing. Turn over the pipe and drag it over the soil to cover the furrow.

## Hip Problems

People with hip problems can also benefit from the previous hints. Use the long-handled tools to make it easier to bend. Or consider raised bed or container gardening to bring the



*Note the grab handle and velcro strap adaptations to this long-handled gardening tool for easier gripping.*

garden up to the gardener's best working height.

## Leg and Knee Problems

It can be more comfortable for a person with knee problems to garden from a chair.

- *A light garden chair is best* because it is easier to move as you work.
- *Tools with extended handles*, such as trowels and cultivators, are available in many garden shops.
- *Make carrying easier* with a sturdy box or a basket with a handle to collect and hold seeds, plants, tools, and small amounts of fertilizer.
- *Convert a small luggage cart* to hold the tool basket and to wheel the materials to the garden.

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## MAKING GARDENING EASIER

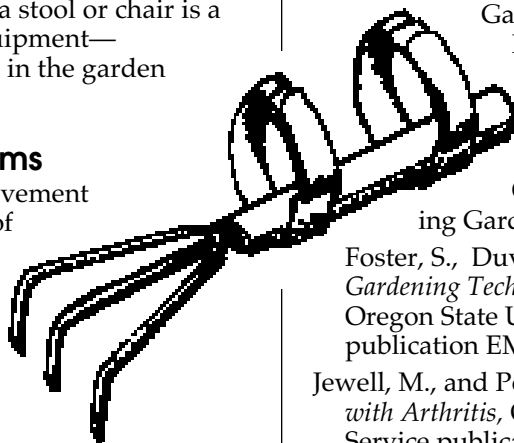
- *Ease balance problems by using a sturdy walker with an attachment for holding tools. Once you arrive at the garden, a stool or chair is a welcome part of your equipment—perhaps one that can stay in the garden for continued use.*

### Arm and Hand Problems

For grip, strength and movement problems, as well as range of motion difficulties, adaptive tools can be bought or developed at home. Children's tools, which are available in any hardware store, are light and can be adapted for use with extensions to lengthen them, or padding to make them easier to grip.

If the hand is non-functioning, you can strap the tool to the wrist or forearm, allowing the gardener to till soil, cultivate, or plant. For a weak grip, either padding or a T-shaped attachment enables the gardener to grasp more easily.

When potting plants, use lightweight plastic pots rather than heavier clay, metal, or wooden containers. Another method of lightening the pot's weight is to replace up to one-half of the soil in the pot with packing nubbins (styrofoam popcorn). Cover the nubbins with a layer of nylon net before putting the soil in the pot. Though you need to fertilize and water more often, those chores are offset by the ease in moving the plants and the excellent drainage.



### For More Information

For more information on the Master Gardener Horticultural Therapy Program, write the Oregon State University Extension Service, Oregon Master Gardener Program, 211 S.E. 80th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97215.

Other titles available in the "Making Gardening Easier" set are:

- Foster, S., Duvall, C., and Powell, J., *Adaptive Gardening Techniques for the Visually Impaired*. Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8498, (Corvallis, 1992).
- Jewell, M., and Powell, J., *Gardening Hints for People with Arthritis*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8499 (Corvallis, 1992).
- Throckmorton, E., and Powell, J., *Gardening Adaptations for People with Gripping and Lifting Problems*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8500 (Corvallis, 1992).
- Foster, S., and Powell, J., *Gardening Strategies for People with Heart and Lung Problems*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8501 (Corvallis, 1992).
- Foster, S., and Powell, J., *Gardening Ideas for Children with Special Needs*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8502 (Corvallis, 1992).
- McNeilan, R.A., and Powell, J., *Therapeutic Benefits of Gardening*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8503 (Corvallis, 1992).
- Rogers, P., and Powell, J., *Gardening with Limited Range of Motion*, Oregon State University Extension Service publication EM 8505 (Corvallis, 1992).

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