

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

By: Ben Sims

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Agriculture Extension Agent

“Gardening: Wellness Benefits for All Ages!”

I don't know about you, but there is something that feels great about getting a little dirt on your hands! Just watching those plants grow and providing you some delicious veggies to eat, or flowers to decorate the kitchen table with, is a wholesome feeling. Gardening provides a variety of wellness benefits for all ages, and keeping your garden safe helps increase its usability.

Varied abilities among gardeners means adaptations to traditional practices are necessary to keep gardeners safe and successful, regardless of age. Kansas State University horticulture expert, Cynthia Domenghini, advises us to focus on three areas: tasks, tools, and design, to do so.

Tasks

If you're gardening with a child, plan to spend plenty of time exploring and learning alongside them. If time is limited, save these tasks for more experienced helpers or independent gardening. Make a list of the tasks that need to be accomplished each day and complete them in an order that varies movements. Spending hours kneeling and weeding is going to put strain on joints, which can result in long-term damage. It's recommended to spend 15 minutes weeding each day followed by a task that require different movement and posture.

It might be good to observe the garden from a different perspective. Identify ways to improve accessibility, such as increasing the raised beds to standing height. Other helpful tips include using automatic irrigation or a soaker hose to reduce the amount of time spent watering and selecting plants that are recommended for your area.

Tools

Proper maintenance of tools is important. Keep pruning tools sharp so less effort is required to make each cut, and keep wooden handles free from splintering. Use lightweight tools such as those made with plastic, carbon, fiber or aluminum handles. You might consider handling the tools before even purchasing them to ensure they are a good fit. Think it through, use long handed tools when standing to prevent bending over to work and adding strain to the back. Then use short-handled tools to fit your gardening needs while sitting.

Kneeling pads and benches can protect joints while also reducing soil compaction. Rolling garden seats allow you to sit while weeding and planting. You can invest in a good pair of gloves that will accommodate any gardening task to protect you from cuts and the potential for infection. Store tools in a central location and avoid leaving them out where they can become a trip hazard. Also, unplug power tools and never leave tools unattended when gardening with children. It's important for young gardeners to learn tool safety, with supervision of course.

Design

Garden pathways should be kept smooth and level to reduce the risk of falls. Window boxes, raised beds and a multitude of container types facilitate gardening while standing or seated. Keep the size of planters less than three feet across to reduce the need for reaching. All points in this size of planter can be reached with short-handled tools.

Working in your garden shouldn't always include continuous work. Set up a place where you can sit in a shaded area. Bring a book out with you to encourage taking breaks when you need it. Also, bring your phone, especially if you garden alone and in case you need help or assistance. On days that are predicted to be warm, do garden work in the early morning hours. Work hard but work smart, and happy gardening!

Information comes from Kansas State University horticulture expert, Cynthia Domenghini.