

# How to garden with a disability



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**Q**uestion: I would love to be able to garden, but I am held back because of a chronic physical disability. Are there ways to make gardening easier for people like myself?

**A**nsWER: Gardening is such a wholesomely healthy activity that it can be enjoyed by anyone, even those with physical challenges. There are so many benefits to creating and sustaining a garden, whether you favor flowers or vegetables, that it's worth the extra effort planning and designing a space that is easily accessible and pleasant to work in.

Some of those benefits are fitness, relaxation, learning new skills which builds confidence and providing nutritious food for yourself and your family.

So what are some things you can do? When planning an easy access garden, one of the foremost considerations is to use raised beds that are high enough to avoid bending and stooping over. Beds can be made of cinder blocks, bricks, stone or wood such as redwood or cedar – do not use creosote-treated wood.

Raised beds should be no more than 4 feet across so one can reach across from either side and at least 2 feet high or higher. Set up the beds where they will receive at least six hours of direct sunlight and are close to the house as well as close to a water source.

If constructed to enable a wheelchair-bound person to easily fit their legs underneath while working the bed, be sure and provide drainage holes in the box. Fill the raised beds with good top soil



PHOTOS BY BONNIE COURTER

**Raised garden beds such as these at the Master Gardener's Discovery Garden are helpful for gardeners in wheelchairs, that use walkers or for those who cannot stoop or bend down.**

and compost, and you're ready to plant.

Once the raised beds are built, you can fit them with trellises or supports to enable vertical plantings like pole beans, cucumbers or other climbers. A trellis with a pulley system that allows the gardener to pull down the trellised plants to harvest can be very helpful.

Plants in raised beds tend to dry out faster so keep your plants well hydrated, especially in the heat of summer. Mulching helps keep moisture in the soil and cuts down on diseases that can be deposited on plants due to rain splash.

Next you should design pathways to build between and around raised beds. Permanent paths made of brick or patio stone, though requiring a big investment initially and quite labor intensive, will keep weeds down, don't need to be replaced and wheelchairs, walkers or canes can easily maneuver on them. Paths should be level, have a textured

surface (not slippery), drain well and at least 4 feet wide with grades not exceeding a 5% rise in elevation.

Benches or seating areas placed along the pathway encourages rest areas for gardeners and allows them to sit and enjoy the tranquility of their garden.

If raised beds aren't an option, you can plant a lot of things in containers which can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes – large pots, planters, barrels, planting bags, old boots, you name it! Containers need to be deep enough to accommodate the plants you intend to fill them with and drainage is most important.

Hanging baskets on a pulley system enables the gardener to easily water and care for plants. If using large pots, get some plant trolleys on wheels so you can move the pot around as needed to catch sunlight. These can be found at garden supply stores or built at home using castors for wheels.



**A trellis with a pulley system that allows the gardener to pull down the trellised plants to harvest can be very helpful.**

Always use potting soil which contains organic material like peat, perlite or vermiculite – not soil from your garden. Fill your containers with plants that require similar watering needs.

For interest, use

containers with bright colors and arrange them at different heights.

Plants for sunny locations are: nasturtium, marigold, geranium, alyssum, lobelia, vinca, zinnia, aster, pansy, petunia, verbena, and dusty

millar.

Plants for shady locations: impatiens, begonias, lobelia, alyssum, pansy, coleus, and fuchsia.

Some vegetables to consider: cherry tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, bush varieties of squash, onions, beets and peppers.

Most herbs, with the exception of the very tall or large ones such as dill, do well in a containers.

Provide work tables close by where you can do your planting and potting.

Tools are available that are ergonomically designed for those with arthritis.

Tool handle grips can be improved by using foam padding, bicycle grips or attach PVC pipe to lengthen handles. Use gloves that have a sticky surface or have gripper dots. Lightweight tools are easier to handle.

Provide a tool shed close by as well where tools can be stored at a height that makes them easily accessible.

With a bit of ingenuity, modifications and initial investment, the wonderful world of gardening can be enjoyed by anyone, even those with impairments.

For more ideas, visit the Discovery Garden near River Forks Park where Master Gardeners have created an Easy Access garden to offer solutions for those who are physically limited. Presently the Discovery Garden is closed to the public due to the COVID19 restrictions, but we hope to open it up soon.

*Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [ask.extension.org/ask](mailto:ask.extension.org/ask). (Presently, the plant clinic is closed until further notice due to public safety orders.) Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*