

# Gardening Through The Ages Good For Body And Soul

With the right tools, gardening can lift seniors' spirits and improve health.

by Ellen C. Wells  
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**A**sk an avid gardener when the gardening bug bit him or her, and you are likely to hear a story about a green-thumbed grandparent. Seniors – people aged 65 years old and older – often have a close connection to gardening that comes from a lifetime of raising their own food and flowers or from an agricultural heritage. For some, the passion for gardening stays just as bright as it was in their younger years, even though it may be a more difficult task.

## The Gardening Elixir: Good for Body and Mind

As seniors get on in years, the strength and agility needed for regular gardening tasks wanes, and with it, their confidence in their abilities. Home Instead Senior Care, the world's largest nonmedical source of companionship and home care services for seniors, has recently kicked off a campaign to encourage senior gardening. Rebecca Kolls, star of TV's "Rebecca's Garden," has partnered with Home Instead's educational program to get the word out about the benefits of bringing seniors and gardening together.

"We know that gardening does help in so many ways," Kolls says, pointing to research that shows it reduces blood pressure and stress, sharpens minds and works

muscles. In fact, according to the Arthritis Foundation ([www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)), gardening ranks up with weight training for its ability to strengthen bones.

"We need to do whatever we can to encourage gardening, and for seniors, that means making gardening easier through tools, techniques, tips and programs like that from Home Instead," Kolls continues. The organization's campaign, "Making Gardening Fun Again for Seniors," was launched at the National Garden Month kickoff in Washington, D.C. in April, and is circulating throughout Home Instead's 500 offices and local media. The campaign aims to return the joys of gardening to seniors who may have difficulties maintaining gardens or who have given up on gardening due to illness.

Jennifer Moran is a community liaison for the Home Instead office based in Norwell, Mass., and has spent several years bringing gardening activities back into the lives of seniors. Using her own gardening experience and Home Instead resources, Moran works with local Councils on Aging, senior centers, adult care centers and short-term rehabilitation facilities to

offer gardening workshops to seniors of all abilities – from still-active individuals to persons needing 24-hour care. The workshop's focus is on gardening made easier and more convenient through the use of containers, easy-to-use tools and assistance with lifting and clean-up.

Moran has seen the effects of gardening activities on seniors firsthand. "I notice with seniors with memory impairment issues that they go back

to a point in time when they were an expert in something, like gardening," Moran says. For seniors who are apprehensive due to memory loss, gardening lets them finally feel they can share knowledge, proving to be a very positive and empowering experience,

she explains. Container gardens – whether at an adult care center or at a senior's home – give them something to nurture and care for every day, Moran says. "It's a positive activity, something to keep them going," Moran explains. "Gardening is one of the more rewarding activities that I am involved in with seniors."

## Understanding Seniors' Needs

Although some might not like to let on,



many seniors develop issues with flexibility, joint pain, strength and fatigue. Gardening activities become more difficult for this age group. Moran finds through her experience with seniors that soil is the biggest obstacle – lifting bags of it, potting it, having the strength to push it aside to place a plant in it and tamp it down. “It takes some strength to place a plant firmly in the pot, and many feel they don’t have that,” she says.

The right tools can make all the difference for senior gardening. Rebecca Rynne of Wight’s Home & Garden, Lynwood, Wash., finds seniors do well with tools that have a good thick grip rather than something that they have to wrap their hands around. And although she’s not near the age of a senior citizen, she’s benefited from the rotating-handled pruners from Felco herself. “They really take the burden off the hands,” Rynne says. “They are a godsend.”

The Arthritis Foundation also recommends the Fiskars PowerGear line of gardening tools. Available in pruner, lopper and hedge shears, the PowerGear tools have gears that increase cutting power, plus ergonomic handles. Also among their recommendations is the Bionic gardening glove. These gloves have anatomically positioned palm pads that reduce fatigue, protect against callus and blister formation and help maintain grip. The Foundation also suggests seniors use a hose caddy to help move garden hoses around.

Moran says many seniors she meets don’t realize they can still garden with the aid of these ergonomic tools. “A lot of stores now have the big-handled tools, but seniors need to know they exist and what they are for,” she says. Clearly marked signage near these tools would help to communicate that.

Rynne teaches workshops on container and small-space gardening at Wight’s, and she says these classes do have a large number of seniors in attendance. “Raised beds and container gardening are best for seniors,” she says. “You can plant anything in containers. I have an entire vegetable garden



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## Senior-Friendly Garden Center Checklist

- ✓ Pavement and aisles level and clutter-free
- ✓ Aisles wide enough for walking aids such as canes, walkers, scooters or two people walking abreast
- ✓ Sturdy, armed benches for resting
- ✓ Senior-friendly employees
- ✓ Clear, easily readable type on signage

planted in a 2-foot diameter container.” The benefit, Rynne explains, is the height of containers and raised beds. The higher off the ground, the less bending needed to water and maintain. “And I find that they don’t have the weeds to manage that in-ground gardens do,” Rynne says, adding that weeding can really take a toll on the hands. Moran suggests garden centers be sure to stock lightweight containers that are easy for seniors to carry.

Rynne also suggests using a handled kneeling pad that converts into a portable stool. Seniors can tend their gardens – whether in the ground or raised in con-

tainers – while using the stool’s support.

### Senior-Friendly Garden Centers

Browsing in a nursery or garden center becomes an issue for seniors, as well. “From experience, seniors get out early in the morning, just at the time when the garden centers are putting plants out on the benches,” Moran says. “It’s hard to move around at that time, with the plants, soil bags and so forth blocking the way.” She also points out that seniors need carts to carry their plants and to help them get through the store. Aisles need to be clear to accommodate them. Having plants displayed at waist level and within reach is also convenient for people with joint and flexibility issues.

Aisles must be smooth and wide enough to allow free access for canes, walkers, scooters or possibly a walking partner. And no matter how small the facility, seniors need easy access to seating in case of fatigue or sudden illness.

Perfect accommodations are of no use if seniors feel they can’t receive service or help. Moran says she never allows seniors in her workshops to lift soil bags, offering assistance with anything she feels might be risky for them. A specially-trained staff member can be appointed to assist seniors with questions about tools and techniques that will make gardening easier for them, and also help out with lifting or other requests. “Seniors really do appreciate the help,” Moran says. “They need to be encouraged but are extremely pleased when they see the end result.” TGC

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## Simple Gardening

Here are some simple gardening project suggestions from Rebecca Kolls and Home Instead Senior Care that will help restore seniors’ green-thumb confidence.

**Patriotic Pots** – Create a container bursting with patriotic colors. Fill an 8- or 10-inch pot with soil and pot up with red, white and blue petunias and salvias. (Okay, maybe purple will have to do!) Check plants daily and water as needed. Fertilize once each week with a half-strength, water-soluble fertilizer.

**Nurturing Nostalgia** – Show the younger generations what plants were in fashion years ago with pots of nostalgic flowers. Choose some old-fashioned favorites: bachelor buttons, cosmos, heliotrope, lobelia, marigolds and Love-in-the-Mist. Share your blooming memories with grandchildren and neighbors. Check water conditions daily, particularly in hot summer weather, and fertilize once per week with a half-strength, water-soluble fertilizer.