

[Gardening with MS: Benefits and tips](#)



Gardening not only has physical, mental and emotional benefits, but can also be easily adapted for people with MS.

by Vicky Uhland

Thirteen years ago, Iona Creedon's life was upended. She had just given birth to her daughter when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. To destress and unwind, Creedon turned to gardening.

Even though she lives in the aptly named Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire, England, Creedon hadn't been a dedicated gardener before her diagnosis. But she felt she needed the mental, emotional and physical solace that only digging in the dirt can give.

"There's such a sense of achievement in making something attractive, in creating a space that makes your heart sing when you're outside," she says. "I use gardening as a form of therapy. It's incredible for my mental health."

Gardening can be intimidating even if you don't have MS. It can be physically punishing and emotionally brutal — ask someone who has watched a sudden hailstorm shred the rare rosebush they've nurtured since its infancy. But gardening can also create a Shangri-La for mind, body and spirit.



Iona Creedon took up gardening to help manage stress after her MS diagnosis.

“Gardening is one of those perfect activities for many people with MS. It’s calming, relaxing, meditative, physically challenging and requires some planning and cognitive work,” says Simon Gale, an occupational therapist and adventure guide at Swedish Neuroscience Institute’s Multiple Sclerosis Center in Seattle.

Stephanie Scharf, an occupational therapist at Prisma Health in Columbia, South Carolina, who’s studying to become a master gardener, has found that gardening can have other pluses as well. “It can actually boost my energy levels because it’s fun to do,” she says.

Since her diagnosis, Creedon has learned how to do everything from building a patio to hauling compost while experiencing MS symptoms. She’s prone to fatigue and heat sensitivity, along with dizziness and cognitive issues when she’s tired. But she makes accommodations that allow both her and her garden to thrive.

Creedon shares her gardening advice in her blog, [Gardening within LiMitS](#). Here’s what she, Gale, Scharf and other gardening experts recommend for specific MS symptoms that can make gardening challenging.

Fatigue and heat sensitivity

While Creedon was experiencing MS symptoms, she dug a pond. But gardening tasks don’t have to be that Herculean. Relying on family members or hiring someone to mow, weed, rake leaves or do other strenuous tasks you don’t like can free up your energy for planting or other gardening activities that bring you joy.

You can also minimize the effort needed in your garden by choosing plants and shrubs that

don't require a lot of cutting back or constant tending. Herbs are excellent options, and perennial flowers don't have to be replanted every year as annuals do.

Low-water plants can also reduce the need to lug a heavy hose around. Another option is an irrigation system or soaker hoses that don't have to be moved. And put plants that require more watering closer to the edge of a garden bed to make them easier to care for.

"Find plants that suit your condition as well as the garden's condition," Creedon says. To make sure she doesn't become so fatigued that she can't garden the next day, Creedon limits physically demanding tasks to an hour, then sits and writes a blog entry. Others might need shorter gardening time frames and longer rest periods. Because gardening can be deceptively labor-intensive, pace yourself as you would if you were exercising.

"Have a plan for what your gardening session will look like, along with a threshold for when you're done," Gale says. "If you hit a wall, know where you can go to rest, like a lawn chair nearby."

Another option is to incorporate gardening tasks into your daily activities. Take a short walk or ride around the garden, pulling a couple of weeds from each bed. Or deadhead the flowers in your container garden while drinking your morning coffee on the terrace.

Creedon also reduces fatigue by using a wheeled utility cart to haul her tools and heavy items like bags of compost. And she opts for ergonomically designed gardening implements that reduce unnecessary movement and are easier to grip if she's feeling weak in her hands.

Ergonomic or other high-quality tools can reduce fatigue in other ways, Gale says.

"Attention is a limited resource. For instance, if you have a hand tremor and a small tool doesn't work well, it can be a distraction that tips you over the edge into neurological fatigue. And that can reduce your ability to plan and control the various movements required for gardening."



A planter box can make a garden more accessible. Photo: iStock

Creedon likes to garden in the early morning or early evening when the temperatures are lower. Even then, it can be useful to wear [cooling cloths, scarves or vests](#). Wide-brimmed hats can shade your face, and a veil hanging from the back of the hat will keep the sun off your neck.

Mobility and balance issues

Scharf is a big fan of raised gardening beds, which eliminate the need to bend down and accommodate people in wheelchairs or scooters. The ideal bed is 24 to 30 inches tall, she says. It also should be narrow enough so you can reach the middle while seated. Raised beds should be placed at least four feet apart to accommodate a mobility device.

It's also crucial to consider tripping or falling hazards when designing paths between your raised beds or other parts of your garden. "Other than bathroom falls, gardening falls are amongst the top falls we hear about," Gale says.

"[Gardening for Life](#)," an adaptive gardening guide produced by Washington State University Master Gardeners in Spokane County, points out that gravel, rock, grass or bark paths are poor choices for people who use mobility devices or have balance issues. The guide suggests concrete, stone slab, crushed stone or brick paths instead.

If you need to tend garden beds at ground level, Scharf suggests using a garden kneeling bench with an adjustable height and a metal bar to help you get up. Make sure the bench is sturdy enough so you can sit or kneel on it. She avoids garden carts with lids you can sit on unless there's a way to lock the wheels or keep the cart from moving and tipping you off the seat.

"Gardening for Life" recommends placing garden beds near your house or driveway for quick accessibility. Container gardens on patios or balconies can bring your landscaping even closer.

And make sure to provide plenty of seating throughout your garden for rest breaks.

Vision and cognitive challenges

Creedon recommends drawing a plan of your garden that identifies the plants in every bed. Planting in clumps, like amaryllis in one area and ginger in another, can also help you remember and visualize what's in each bed.

For people with vision issues, "Gardening for Life" suggests choosing plants with high contrast like coleus, lamium, coral bells, variegated red-twig dogwood, emerald and gold euonymus, and tri-color beech. It also recommends plants with bright red, orange or pink flowers, which are easier to see than blue or purple blooms. And avoid cacti, roses or other

plants with painful thorns or spikes.

To keep track of your plants and where they're planted, try metal markers that identify plants. Scharf also suggests writing the name of the plant on a ribbon and tying it to the plant. "Make sure the ribbon is not so tight it will affect the growth of the plant," she says.

"If you use a ribbon or some type of color marker without the plant name, write down the plant name on a piece of paper or graph paper so you can keep track of what is planted in that location," Scharf adds.

Creedon likes to focus on all of the senses while gardening. So, if you can't see a plant well, you can still touch, hear, smell or taste it.

"There are amazing plants to feel, like lamb's ear. You can hear the rustle of certain grasses when the wind is blowing," she says. "And the sound of a water feature is a gentle way to appreciate your garden."

Vicky Uhland is a writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

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