

Get growing



Almost anyone can reap the benefits of gardening with the right approach.

by Kelly Smith

Ah, spring. A warm morning spent digging in the soil can bring myriad benefits—just ask Van Roberts. “Long before I knew I had multiple sclerosis, gardening was a way to relieve stress, to disconnect from the pressures of my job and come back to the slower pace of growing things,” says Roberts, 54, of Tehachapi, Calif., who was diagnosed in 2005. The healthful (and tasty!) culinary benefits of growing herbs and vegetables are an added bonus, he says.

Lay the groundwork

Your garden’s design can be as individual as you are; it needn’t have neat rows planted directly into the ground. “Your personal garden [can be] a single planter in your home, boxes on a deck or a raised bed in the backyard,” says Laurie Reiser, 61, a master gardener who was diagnosed with MS in 2003 and teaches adaptive gardening at the Colorado State University extension office.

Indoor or patio gardening requires a smaller investment of time and energy, particularly when it comes to controlling weeds.

Raised beds—platforms built on the ground (ideally not more than 4 feet wide) with soil and plants placed inside the frame—are more easily accessible for people who use a wheelchair, or for whom bending or kneeling is difficult, explains Reiser.



Container garden



Container peas



Mature coleus

“Remember that it’s about you, what you like and what you can do, not what you can’t,” Reiser says. If you do garden in the yard, she recommends creating a wide, smooth path to make it easier to maneuver through the plot with a wheelchair or walker. A straight path will help people with visual challenges.

Choose wisely

Since his diagnosis, Roberts has had to change his gardening approach to focus on growing plants that need less attention, he says. Growing tomatoes, bell peppers and Swiss chard is ideal because “nothing beats the ease and success rate of these plants,” he says. “They are hardy, do well in small areas, and as long as you start with good soil, need nothing but water.” Indoors, he likes potted fruit trees like lemons or oranges. “They fill your home with wonderful smells,” he says.

Lifelong gardener Veronica McTiernan, 62, of Tarrytown, N.Y., was diagnosed with MS in 2004 and now prefers working with perennials. Because they regrow each year, they greatly reduce the labor-intensive planting process, she explains. “Don’t necessarily try to get back to what you used to do,” McTiernan counsels. “Use this as an opportunity to learn about new plants that may be easier for you to maintain.

If you have low vision, for example, try growing brightly colored plants in contrasting rows and staying away from roses, cacti or anything else with thorns. For advice about plants that do well in your area, contact your local office of the nationwide Cooperative Extension System, which provides free, practical advice to gardeners.

Online resources

Gardening

Dig deeper for information on accessible and regional gardening. Find tips, resources and local support:

- [National Gardening Association](#)
- [Gardens for Every Body](#)

- [Cooperative Extension System](#)

Adaptive tools

Tools with ergonomically designed features can make your gardening experience more comfortable with these tools:

- [Gardener's Supply Co.](#)
- [Gardening With Ease](#)
- [Corona Tools](#)
- [Practical Ergonomic & Therapeutic Aids](#)

The right tools

"Before my diagnosis, I could garden for hours, using a shovel, garden fork or spade to dig,"

McTiernan says. Now, she uses adaptive tools with ergonomically angled handles that help keep her hand and wrist in natural positions. Similarly, Roberts likes tools with soft, spongy grips. These adaptations help people with diminished grip strength, a common problem with MS. Long-handled tools can also be helpful, as they reduce the need to bend and kneel. Kneepads can help lessen the pain of kneeling on hard ground.

Other helpful tools include wheeled garden utility carts to transport debris and tools; oscillating hoes, which relieve pressure on the back; and ratcheting pruners, which require less pressure because they magnify the force you apply. A flexible water hose provides a lightweight alternative to the typical heavy, clunky hose; better yet, consider switching to an automated watering system.

For all its benefits, gardening can also be tiring. After his diagnosis, Roberts says, "I learned to slow down, be more efficient and to work in smaller blocks of time." He recommends working in the early morning or early evening to minimize heat-related symptoms of MS. "Plan your activities ahead of time, and don't take on projects that are too big," he cautions.

McTiernan says, "Wear a hat, garden in the shade as much as possible, and keep your cellphone and drinking water nearby." She recommends taking frequent breaks, as well as using a garden seat that allows you to rest or to work while seated.

Good gardening habits

Reiser says it's also important to "protect yourself from sunburn, bug bites, cuts and scratches. This is especially important if you are taking an immune-system modifying therapy," as minor wounds can become serious for those with compromised immune systems. Wear a good pair of gardening gloves to protect your hands. She recommends asking friends and neighbors to help with any heavy lifting. Most people will be glad to help—especially if they know they can share in the bounty down the line.

Kelly Smith is a Denver-based writer.