

Now I have a miraculous little garden, but for years, I could only relish the possibility. I loved to listen to people who watered their curly endive and ate their own arugula and grew sweet basil on their back porch. "It's my meditation," one friend confided, and I swooned with a bad case of greens envy. And flowers! What's more beautiful than a vase filled with saucer sized tulips from your own yard? But beware. Gardening can be a source of pain if you don't know beans about preventing injuries. Your most personal fitness trainer offers up a short-course on growing your awareness.

Dig Into Nature.

Are you into gardening? Please say yes. Food you grow yourself tastes better, costs less, has greater nutritional value AND it leaves a carbon footprint the size of a grape. It's a kind of miracle. I can't think of a mean thing to say about it, except...

Gardening isn't an aerobic sport, and it won't grow your fitness the way running, walking, and biking will. But it sure can produce lots of pleasure, not to mention Green Goddess cauliflower, Box Car Willie tomatoes and Purple Passion asparagus.

Gardening also helps you cultivate a calm, focused mind while you're putting all the major muscles of your body to work—digging, lifting, and carrying. Besides burning calories, gardening connects us to the earth, and it's that mindful exchange of energy—you plant, nature grows—that is so joyful and satisfying.

Growing stuff in a garden is also a splendid way to plant ideas in your child's brain about what real food is, and how good it can taste. Next thing you know, your 10-year-old is snacking on kale chips instead of corn chips, and he goes to sleep at night dreaming of broccoli stalks the size of baseball bats.

Well, not immediately, but over time. Tending to a little garden—even a flowerpot on the windowsill—can give your child a wondrous sense of being connected to nature. It's a good thing.

Gardening is right up there with fly-fishing as a low-injury activity. But you still need awareness. If you rush into your garden chores carelessly, tweeting and texting, your mind a million miles away, you can wrench your back, create crippling tension in your shoulders or wind up with a neck stiffer than a newborn zucchini.

So before you start growing a list of gardening aches and pains, consider the following:

Learn to lift and carry. Prepare before you lift. Take a breath or two and make sure your body is aligned and ready. Relax your head and neck, drop your shoulders, and ,when you lift, engage your core muscles (your abs, glutes, torso muscles on both sides of your spine, front and back.) Lift slowly, pushing down through your feet, and drawing up through your legs. No grabbing and snatching, and no undue pressure or strain on your lower back.

Carry heavy items (bags of fertilizers, rocks, prize-winning watermelons) close to your body, not out in front of you, arms outstretched. Give thanks for the wheelbarrow, and use one whenever you feel like it.

And finally, think it through before you do. If you think something is too heavy to lift or carry by yourself, it probably is. Macho is not an evolved state. Get help, and avoid a nasty injury.

Small bites avoid big problems. When you shovel or dig, be content to take small bites with good tools that fit your hand. Good gloves will protect those hands so find a pair you like, even if they're pink.

And just like in the gym, don't overdo it. Big shovels loaded with heavy dirt can easily strain your back, shoulders, and knees.

To avoid post-planting strains and sprains, keep your mind focused on the task at hand: smaller loads, no sudden twisting or torquing, moving with awareness so you stay balanced and aligned.

A little protection goes a long way. Start with your knees. Protect their delicate structure by kneeling on a foam pad or towels. Protect your eyes with sunglasses and a hat. Protect your skin from the burning sun with a proper cover-up—clothes or nontoxic sunscreen—and by moderating exposure.

Begin your gardening with a little warmup, simple range-of-motion stretches that juice up your joints and energize your muscles for the work ahead. If you feel pain when you garden, back off, relax, and, if you start up again, look for an easier way to do the same task. Drink enough water to stay hydrated, and don't stay in any position too long.

Cultivate calmness. To make all your gardening chores more effortless, move with the flow of your breath. This can work wonders in all your activities, from shooting baskets to unloading your car. Focusing on your breath gets you started, but then it's up to you to immerse yourself in the moment and not distract yourself with memories of the past or worries for the future.

Growth sustains life. What's good for the plants is good for you, too. Once that seed is planted, you'll never want to buy another plastic box of tasteless tomatoes again.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! Peas and Prosperity

“Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.”

—May Sarton



GOING DEEPER

This week, do something related to growing food.

If you don't have room for a garden, plant a window box and fill it with the herb of your choice. Parsley, mint, basil, and rosemary will give you a taste of success with very little effort. And your dinner guests will go crazy when they see you showering their plates with chopped homegrown parsley.

If you don't have space for a window box, join a community garden.

Or ask a friend with outdoor space if you can take a bit of it to grow some tasty greens or other stuff you'd like to share.

The ultimate goal is to get your hands in the soil and wiggle them around.

Wiggle your nose around, too. Inhale and exhale deeply, until you know what the earth smells like.

Compound that feeling with gratitude...and your spirit will grow faster than a radish.

