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PREVENTING BACK PAIN IN THE GARDEN by Dr. Brian S. Seaman, DC, FCCSS(C), FICC

The snow is finally gone but now we can see what was left behind last Fall (lots of leaves!) and over the Winter. On the bright side, we should not dismay because gardening season is here again!

Like most of our neighbors, we can hardly wait to clean up the yard, trim the hedge, spread the mulch and start working in the garden. However these activities, as well as digging up a new or old garden patch, painting fences and pushing lawn mowers can take a toll on your back. Every Spring and Summer chiropractors treat many gardening enthusiasts who injure themselves. Here are a number of hints of how to try and prevent that next episode of back pain.

Remember not to take on too much, too soon. It is very tempting after the long Winter to attempt to do everything all in one weekend. However trying to do so will generally lead you to overstrain your back, and cause some problems. Remember, over the Winter most people are generally less active; especially this past Winter, due to the number of storms and poor walking conditions. If you have not been very active over the Winter, remember to start doing some exercises (or even start walking) and pace yourself when you are out in the garden or working in the yard. Often back injuries can be attributed to overusing or overstraining your back.

Do some gentle stretching exercises before you start, periodically during your gardening, and again afterwards. This will help to reduce the chance of injuring your back. For example, if you are bent forward for a period of time, stand up and extend your lower back (lean backwards) to reduce the strain on the muscles and the discs. Do not remain bent over or stooped forward for prolonged periods of time. This is a position your back will not be used to and it will tell you so!

Be sure to wear appropriate clothing, a wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen. While it is still a bit cool on some days, the sun can still damage your skin. Be sure not to over-dress and do not under-dress.

Be sure not to get dehydrated while working in the garden. It is very easy to lose track of time. Be sure that you have water available and that you are drinking this throughout the day.

Use long handled tools to reduce the amount of time that you have to bend over. There are also some tools now that have padded handles which are larger and easier to grip (especially if you are having any difficulty with arthritis in your hands or wrists).

When you are weeding, planting seeds, or putting in transplants, be sure to get down on "all fours" or kneel. There are specially designed kneeling pads, which also have railings along each side so you can help push yourself up from a kneeling position. If you do not have one of these, you can always take a sturdy bucket and turn it upside down in the garden. Put one hand on the bottom of the bucket when you are leaning forward which will give you better balance and also assist you from pushing up from a stooped or kneeling position.

When you are shoveling, raking, hoeing or lifting, be sure to use your legs – not your back! Also, if you are raking or hoeing, switch sides – this will help to reduce the strain on your back. The downside, is that you will often find that raking or hoeing on one side is not as easy as the other!

If you follow through with these suggestions, it should help to reduce the possibility of you developing back pain while you are working in the garden or the back yard. However if you do develop soreness in your back muscles, or some of your joints, be sure to take a break; rest, and use an ice pack on the area for periods of 15 minutes, every couple of hours. The ice will generally help to reduce the irritation or inflammation in the area, as well as decreasing the pain.



For acute injuries, or pain that does not respond to rest and ice, consult with your chiropractor or health care professional. Do not suffer needlessly by telling yourself it will be better in a few days. Our Summer is much too short to do that! Your chiropractor can also provide ideas as to appropriate exercises which should help strengthen your back muscles.

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