

The Unlimited Garden

Contact: Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

July 21, 1997

Most of us who garden recognize that working with plants is good for us both physically and mentally. Many rehabilitation hospitals and nursing care centers have carried this benefit a step farther and made horticulture a part of the treatment of their clients. There are trained and experienced individuals who work as horticultural therapists to set goals and design gardening activities to help people regain their health. In addition, many volunteers, especially among Master Gardeners, help with horticultural therapy programs.

These programs provide many tips that can help anyone, especially individuals with disabilities, enjoy gardening more. The key to successful gardening is to keep the garden a manageable size. Of course, that size is different for each person, but small is best. A container full of healthy plants has greater therapeutic benefit than a huge garden filled with weeds, insects, and disease. Always start small then let the garden grow as success and self-confidence develop.

The best design for a garden will depend on an individual's strength and personal preference. For example, among people who use a wheelchair for mobility, some people prefer to get in touch with the earth and move along the garden row with two sturdy mats, transferring from one mat to the other as they progress. In this case, short handled tools are ideal. For people who prefer to work in regular ground beds from their chair, long-handled tools make the job easier. These tools should be light weight and have small working heads so that exceptional strength is not required for the leverage to lift them.

An alternative is to build raised beds so that the plants and soil are at a convenient height to maintain from a seated position. If twisting to the side is difficult, consider a shallow planter mounted on legs or set on a tabletop that allows for the knees to fit under it. While this limits the choices of plants, many herbs and low growing annual flowers will perform well in a planter only 4 inches deep if watered daily in the heat of summer.

A new gardener who has a visual impairment may build self confidence and develop skills in a bed that can be worked while standing.

Avoid the urge to plant too many herbs and other fragrant plants that can overwhelm each other with conflicting odors. Look for plants with interesting textures (i.e. Lamb's ear),

sounds (i.e. the seed pods of Siberian Iris), and certainly taste (the miniature tomato, Robin, is a heavy producer all season in only 6 inches of soil).

Try a few action plants also. The explosive seed pods of the balsa or touch-me-not are a delight for gardeners and friends alike.

Another suggestion might be to use wind chimes or other sound producers to help in orientation in the garden.

More gardening information is available in the [Virginia Gardener Newsletter](#).