



ADAPTED GARDENING ACTIVITIES



GARDENING FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS

This information booklet looks at ways of using gardening activities therapeutically if you are a wheelchair user. It is based on our experience of working with patients in Horticultural Therapy sessions who need to use a wheelchair permanently such as someone with:

A spinal injury; or who need to use a wheelchair intermittently such as someone with a lower limb amputation.

It includes information on how different gardening activities may be beneficial therapeutically and practical advice on how to make gardening tasks easier.



Therapeutic
Benefits of
Seasonal
Horticultural Tasks

GARDENING FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS



Gardening for upper limb booklet.

Therapeutic gardening activities

Garden design/layout

Access to and within the garden will affect ease of movement to different areas in it and outbuildings such as sheds and greenhouses. Wheelchair access will be **easier** if the garden is **level**, **paths are wide** (with a **raised edge** to stop the castors going over the edge) and **surfaces are even**.



The **size of wheelchair** and castors will affect the type of surface which can be used, e.g., some wheelchairs may cope better with **challenging surfaces** such as gravel, slate, or wet grass than others.



Mark's gardening tips.
BBC Two –
Gardeners' World,
2019, Episode 16.



Wheelchair castors will tend to sink into wet grass, but it may be possible to **reinforce the lawn** to prevent this or consider changing to off road tyres. Other options are to **reduce the size of the lawn**, ensure it can be **accessed via nearby pathways** or consider **hard landscaping materials** which will provide a level surface.



The skill of the wheelchair user is another factor.

Some of our patients will practice **advanced wheelchair skills** enabling them to back wheel balance to navigate uneven ground such as gravel, grass, and pebbles. This technique can also be used to navigate single steps and thresholds, for example into a shed, greenhouse or onto a patio.

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For wheelchair users with advanced skills, it may be possible to navigate a series of steps with a bannister for support. This will be dependent on the size of the step as the radius of the back wheel will need to be equal to or more than the depth of the step for this to be feasible.

However, advanced skills should only be attempted if you have received **appropriate training** from a healthcare professional and the ability and confidence to utilize these techniques. If this is in doubt, then ensuring surfaces are level or using ramps as an alternative to steps is preferable.



Consider **turning space** in any outbuildings situated in the garden which should allow for a **360 degree turn** to be fully accessible. Otherwise, it will be necessary to manoeuvre forwards and backwards to enter and exit smaller spaces.



Cultivating soil (digging, forking, hoeing, raking, weeding).

Height of working space

This is an important consideration. A raised bed can enable easier access, particularly for full time wheelchair users. Aim for a bed which is at least 3 sleepers high, but this may vary depending on your height when seated in your wheelchair. Ideally the raised bed should be reached from either side with the centre easily accessed from each side, approx.1m width is a good guideline. Some of our patients with good trunk control can transfer to sit on the edge of the raised bed and work from this position as another option.



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Soil type

This can influence how much effort may be required to break up the soil so a heavy clay may be more challenging than a light, sandy soil to work with. Using a raised bed is that you can choose what compost you fill it with, so it doesn't rely on the soil type in your own garden.

Working at ground level

Consider long handled tools with interchangeable tool heads (see adaptive tools). Transferring to sit on the ground maybe another option for some wheelchair users.

No dig/mulching

Consider no dig beds and mulching areas to reduce the need for weeding, digging, and watering.

Dense planting

Can reduce the need to weed.

Hoeing/Raking

Easier to do in dry weather and is suitable for annual weeds which can be left on the soil surface to die back and rot down. A perennial weed with a deeper root will still require digging out.

Pruning

Consider using shrubs which are **low maintenance** and require less pruning. Make sure you use the best tool for the job (see adaptive tools).



Pruning sitting down and from a wheelchair, pruning from a wheelchair, pruning tools when sitting.
Thrive



Mowing the lawn for disabled people, mowing the grass for disabled gardeners, mowing & lawn tools.
Thrive

Mowing grass

Consider slow growing varieties of grass and keeping a longer cut of grass to reduce the frequency of grass cutting. Or use other plant varieties as a lawn such as low growing chamomile or thyme this would work in smaller areas of lawn.

Consider using a **robot mower** which can be programmed to automatically mow the lawn.



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Watering

Think about using an Irrigation system or a retractable hose which is less likely to kink and will recoil automatically. An outside tap is easier to access.



Adaptive techniques

Prepare before you start

Gather the tools you will need for the task and transport using a trolley or box which can be positioned on your lap to carry it.

Pace activities

To avoid flare-ups of pain or fatiguing too quickly intersperse repetitive tasks with short rest breaks or ensure that you take a steadier pace to avoid boom and bust. Use the time to take in and appreciate your surroundings.



User a timer

This can be a useful reminder of how long you have been spending on a task to prompt you to take a break or switch tasks

Balance activities

Be aware of the impact of the whole day so don't plan highly strenuous, mentally, or physically, activity either side of a physical garden session. Or if you do adapt the garden slot to something less physical. Balance activities through the week as well as looking at the individual session.

Complete tasks in stages

Do a bit at a time rather than trying to do it all in one go.

Vary activities

Change and do a different activity which is not using your lower limb in the same way. You can resume the original activity later this may help to manage pain and fatigue.

Find body positions which are comfortable

Think about the position of tools you are using in relation to your body and adjust for increased comfort. Periodically changing direction when hoeing or raking, for example, may also help to adjust body position.

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What kind of plot?
The no dig plot.
RHS Gardening

Support

Are there people who can help with tasks you find more difficult? This could be a way of integrating family and friends into nurturing your garden and conserve your energy for tasks you can manage more easily.

Low maintenance growing

Manage your expectations of what you can grow and consider ways of making your garden lower maintenance. For example, replace grass with hard landscaping materials, such as reclaimed bricks, paving slabs, gravel, or slate which can still look attractive and be a feature.

Adaptive tools

Thrive have a useful website for advice on choice of tools to make these tasks easier. (Follow the link on the left).

Consider tools which will make the task easier.

Lightweight, long handled, adjustable, powered or assist movement.

Chose the right tool for the task.



Gardening tools for disabled people, tools for disabled gardeners.
Thrive



Ergonomically designed garden tools
Wolf-Garten Tools

Try different tools before buying.

Lots of companies have a wide range of choices so think about what best suits your needs to see what you find easier to use.

Ensure tools are well maintained

Sharpen pruning tools so they are easier to use to make accurate cuts.

Free standing compost bins



The cutting edge of gardening.
Darlac Ltd.

May be easier if working from a seated position as they turn by a handle or try **open pens** which are more accessible.

Minimise challenging surfaces

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