

# Gardening with Grace

BEFORE DIGGING AND PLANTING, AVOID POTENTIAL INJURY WITH A SENSIBLE FITNESS PLAN

BY CHRIS TRABER  
Staff Writer

While gardeners take great pains to prepare lawnmowers, shears and rakes for the season, few ready the most important tool — their body.

"People are rushing to the nursery to buy top soil, fertilizer and flowers, but they forget one thing," said personal trainer John Leonard, owner of Fit 4 Real Fitness in Markham.

"They haven't done this for many months and there's a tremendous physical aspect to gardening. It's an intense activity

and while most folks wouldn't think of spending six hours skiing or golfing the first time out for the season, that's exactly what they do in their gardens.

"Although gardening is a rather peaceful undertaking, it involves as many muscles as most sports. It really becomes important to have some kind of conditioning program in place or gardeners can suffer major injuries."

In addition to a relatively simple training regimen to strengthen the body core, loosen muscles and limber up limbs, gardeners should exercise due diligence when in the yard.

Proper body positioning, well designed gardening gloves and tools along with frequent rest breaks are the key to healthy gardening, Mr. Leonard contends.

"Gardening is an activity that can cause muscle strain to the lower back, shoulders, knees and arms, especially for those who are out of shape or don't move properly," he said. "Tending lawn and flower beds requires a lot of crouching, bending, reaching and lifting."

As such, Mr. Leonard recommends a warm-up prior to any heavy work.

Start with a five-minute walk to unkink muscles and kick start circulation. Follow up by stretching all major muscle groups to help prevent injury. Focus on the back, neck, hands and fingers. Start with easy raking.

Be aware of your posture and body mechanics, he said.

"Move your feet instead of twisting at your waist when sweeping, raking, mulching or potting," Mr. Leonard said.

"If you can't avoid twisting, tighten your stomach muscles in order to protect your back.

"Use your legs rather



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

York Region fitness expert John Leonard shows the proper stance to take while edging a garden. "Although gardening is a rather peaceful undertaking, it involves as many muscles as most sports," he said.

than your back when lifting. Bend your knees, keep your back straight and hold the object close to your body to prevent unnecessary strain."

Ensure you have gloves and the right equipment

for the task.

"Use ergonomically correct tools," he said. "Tools for weeding should have long handles, and get yourself a potting bench to avoid bending. Sit on the ground

to trowel and use a kneel pad to avoid putting pressure on the knees."

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association concurs,

See AVOID, page 33.

## Cycle, walk before diving into dirt

Fit 4 Real Fitness president and personal trainer John Leonard provides the following warm-up and stretching guide specifically for gardeners.

- Enjoy a low aerobic activity such as a brisk walk around the block or five minutes on a treadmill or exercise bike.

- Mimic the activities you are about to perform. You'll need a kitchen chair.

Face the seat of the chair away from you so the back is facing you.

Hold on to the top of the seat back and do a squat. Start with your legs at hip width apart, bend at the knees and lower yourself to the floor. Do not exceed 90 degrees at the knees and hips.

Next come the lunges. Start by stepping forward with your right leg, slowly lower your left knee to the ground. With one hand on the chair for stability, reach for the floor with your free hand as if you're picking something up. Reverse the exercise. Perform two sets of 10-to-15 squats and lunges.

Now you're ready to stretch.

- Reach out and place

your hands on a wall. Bend forward so your shoulders are below your hands. Shift your hips backwards and hold for 20 seconds to stretch the back and shoulders.

- Lie face down on the floor. Using forearms, press upper body forward, raising the chest while keeping the hips in contact with the floor. Hold for 20 to 30 seconds.

- Sit on a chair with the right leg across the opposite knee, push down on the right knee and lean forward until a stretch is felt in your hip. Hold and repeat with the other leg.

- Stand with the legs wider than shoulder width apart. Raise your right arm and lean to the left without leaning forward or backward. Lean until a comfortable stretch is felt in your side. Hold and repeat on the other side.

- Lie on your back on the floor. Gently rotate the trunk and bent knees to one side so that your knees are facing entirely to one side. Keep your shoulders on the ground. Hold and repeat on other side.

—Chris Traber

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