

GOT WEEDS? GARDENING CAN HELP BUILD STRONG BONES

By Vera Strader

Pulling weeds can actually be a good thing according to a University of Arkansas study. Researchers found that women over 50 who worked in the garden at least once a week were less likely to suffer from osteoporosis (bone thinning) than those who performed other kinds of exercise. Of 3,310 women 50 and older, 57 percent had low bone density. Upon comparison of the women's exercise activities including calisthenics, bicycling, dancing, and jogging, only weight training and yard work were significant for maintaining healthy bones.

While osteoporosis is often considered a women's disease, many men also suffer broken bones, especially in later years. Why is garden work beneficial to bone health? The best exercise for bones is weight-bearing exercise that forces you to work against gravity. Walking, hiking, and stair climbing are weight bearing. Bicycling and swimming, while great exercise, are not weight bearing. Gardening is often considered to be a rather dainty activity but there's a lot of weight-bearing going on—not only pulling those irksome weeds, but pushing a mower, toting supplies, digging holes, turning compost, and much more.

Furthermore, gardening is likely to be undertaken regularly, carries a low risk of injury, and sunlight boosts vitamin D production which may help calcium absorption. Another study, from Tufts University, indicates that regular sunlight may promote gum and dental health.

Protect from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) light with a hat with a wide brim and a good slathering of sunscreen 30 minutes before you go outside. UV light is commonly divided into two types-- UVA and UVB. Use sunscreens and lip balms with an SPF factor of at least 15 and that provide both UVA and UVB protection. Reapply every two hours. The darkness of sunglasses has nothing to do with protection. Both prescription and nonprescription sunglasses should be labeled to block at least 60 percent UVA and 95 percent UVB. Remember the sun is especially strong at our higher altitudes and during the middle of the day. And, UV light comes through haze and clouds too.

All adults need a tetanus (lockjaw) booster shot every 10 years since the tetanus bacteria are present worldwide and are commonly found in soil, dust, and manure. Yes, the bacteria can make its way through a deep wound or even a small skin prick, but prevention is as easy as routine immunization and booster shots—for gardeners and non-gardeners alike!

Remember, gardening is not an extreme sport; in other words, if it hurts don't do it! If you have health problems such as heart trouble, high blood pressure, diabetes or obesity, check with your doctor before you begin a regular exercise program, gardening included.

Yard work can not only improve bone health, it also increases muscle strength, coordination, balance, facilitates weight management, and leads to better overall health. Add a little wise prevention and it can also be satisfying and soothing. Gardening gives the opportunity to enjoy that proverbial robin on the wing, the scent of freshly turned soil, and the fragrance of the roses—though personally, I doubt I'll ever enjoy pruning those gosh-darned, stickery roses!

On a different subject, we'll be in the Master Gardener booth at the Home & Garden Show at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds on April 14 and 15. Come by and pick up gardening information or just say hello. See you at the Home & Garden Show and see you in the garden.

Vera Strader is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County and also a Registered Dietitian who promotes both healthy gardens and healthy people. Go to <http://medlineplus.gov/> for more information regarding osteoporosis and exercise.

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.