

Staying Fit in the Garden

By Lori Littleton

When did working in the garden start to become more work than pleasure? Was it when I woke up sore from an hour's work of raking? Or when my knees couldn't bear to have my body weight on them? Or perhaps from debating with our young boys about who had the biggest shovel and hoe?

Over the weekend, we began raking the oak leaves in our backyard. I noticed that in order to maintain a steady pace, I had to switch the rake from one hand to the other every five minutes or so. I asked myself a difficult question, "Is my body beginning to tell me I'm getting 'older?'"

In total denial, I had the brilliant idea that working in the garden could be just like going to the gym! So I strategically began keeping track of how much time I was spending raking and in what "exercise" positions. I tried to concentrate on my breathing, feeling each breath go in and out (remembering not to give myself a side ache). I was saying the words over and over in my head... "What we need here is a...mulcher"!

An hour later, when I caught my breath and came inside, I googled how many calories one burns while gardening. For my weight, I burned 235 calories in an hour and I had a leaf free back yard to show for it. Having five established Valley Oak trees on our lot leaves (no pun intended) a lot of hours for raking and other yard maintenance chores. I don't think I realized how many real exercise hours I put forth working in the garden.

I'd been keeping tally of the actual hours I've spent in the garden since we bought our home, (not many I'm ashamed to admit). I spend less time in the garden in the summer hours, more in the winter. It's much easier to spend hours outside in the cool air than to try to work in the wee hours of the morning or at dusk during the heat of the summer.

The morning after we raked the backyard I was sore and a little cranky. Why was I sore? I thought perhaps I should have stretched prior to raking, gotten my heart rate up by chasing the kids around a little bit. Then I thought of that difficult question... that milestone birthday...did that have an effect on my stamina and ability to garden and work in the yard with ease and pleasure? Perhaps, but maybe not. Maybe it was I who needed to change my mind set.

So, I started surfing the internet and came across an article by Dean Fosdick from The Associated Press. https://www.nwitimes.com/lifestyles/home-and-garden/aerobic-gardening/article_66f60925-0e5b-533e-915d-65f45ef47d43.html He really brings to light that gardening doesn't have to be such work. It can be fun, using common-sense ways to ease gardening chores, including:

- Building your raised beds narrow and small. Narrow eliminates hard-to-reach plants. Small means not needing as much potting soil.
- Wait to weed until after a rain. A good soaking loosens the soil. And mulch liberally to keep weeds from getting started.

- Gardening for the vision-impaired can be done with the help of aromatic markers. Choose flowers and herbs with bright colors and distinctive scents.
- Pathways should be wide enough for power chairs, wheelchairs or walkers. Add handrails, benches and pullouts so physically impaired gardeners can pause to comfortably enjoy the fruits of their labor.
- Grow vertically if you find it difficult to stoop. Choose vegetable varieties like pole beans and tomatoes, or plant morning glories, clematis and other flowering vines.

Age, Smage... These are wonderful ideas, ones we all can have some fun with over the winter months. However, we are getting a mulcher and I am going to stretch before I rake next weekend.

Lori Littleton graduated from the University of California Cooperative Extension Central Sierra Master Gardener training program in 2006.

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, or pick up the local Master Gardener book "Sharing the Knowledge: Gardening in the Mother Lode" at Mountain Books or the UCCE Office both in Sonora, CA.