



Gardening for the Handicapped & Elderly

by Dana Young, UC Master Gardener

Although I am far from being handicapped, I do fall into the ranks of being considered a "Senior Citizen." When I moved into my home a few years ago, I decided that I wanted to garden for as long as physically possible, so with that in mind I planned my outdoor space accordingly. Here are some suggestions that I have, if you are thinking of making life in the garden easier for you.

Raised beds are so much easier on a person's back than gardening in the ground. I love them for several reasons. They look neat, the garden soil doesn't get so compacted as in regular gardens, and water and fertilizer are only applied to actual plants and not the aisles between the rows. Boxes can even be table height to accommodate wheelchairs. I have seven raised beds that are four feet by twelve feet in size. My husband and I made sure that the space between the boxes would accommodate our lawn mower, which we don't often use because water doesn't reach this area. But if you are building your own raised beds, be sure to include enough space to walk in between and maybe enough to push a wheel barrow.



Photo courtesy of Manuel Jimenez, Farm Advisor Emeritus, University of California



It is important that these raised boxes are only wide enough so I can reach half way across on each side with ease. I don't want them too long either because it would be too tempting to walk across them and compact the soil.

For irrigation my husband piped water close to our vegetable patch and we ran a simple overhead system in the grow boxes. I water most of our trees and berries by hand with a hose because I can let it drip slowly and deeply. I love to water by a hose because I use the time to see what is going on out there. It is a great opportunity to check for pest infestations as well as picking produce at its peak. Be on the lookout for slippery areas where water doesn't drain well.

For fruit growing I have several small trees, berry plants and grape vines. My trees are EZ pick types that have been featured in previous articles. They are basically genetically smaller varieties, which are severely pruned to keep them small. I never use a ladder to spray my trees and I am not inundated with excess fruit. My three peach trees and one nectarine all ripen at different times, which really work well for our family. The same goes for my grapes. I have seven vines of three varieties and we have grapes close to four months in the summer. Everything is kept small and in a defined area.

Often I use stakes to secure plants or shelters in strong winds. Stakes can be dangerous if someone were to fall

on them so I will invert a flowerpot over the top of them so they are not so sharp. I constantly am picking up rakes, shovels and other tools for the same reason. Make sure chemicals, even organic ones are stored safely.

One final point is that our garden is close to our actual house. This makes it more convenient to gather herbs and vegetables for a quick meal. We have separated our food growing area by a fence to keep our pets out. Dog and cat waste is very dangerous around food. Never use it for compost even if it is years old.

I plan on working in my garden for a few more decades. With all the fresh produce I eat, the exercise I get in the garden, and the joy of living I feel in my heart, I should be around for a while.

Happy Gardening, Friends!

May 6, 2017