

## Accessible Gardening

by Contra Costa Master Gardener Chantal Guillemin

Bring the garden to the gardener by making it a safe and comfortable environment for visually-impaired, wheel-chair bound persons or others with limited strength and mobility. Design, planning, organization, modified soil containers and the use of adaptive tools are but a few strategies which may prolong gardening as a pleasurable and productive activity for many people.

Save time, effort and ensure safety through careful garden design. For example, successful garden design for the visually-impaired may include using shrubs or trees or fragrant plants as markers or a change in path texture to indicate a change in direction. Introduce elements of water and wind as landmarks useful for orientation by including fountains and chimes. Remove obstructions from garden paths and have water puddle away from walkways. You may wish to install seating for frequent rest breaks and railings on steps. Limit flowerbed width to three feet so gardeners can comfortably reach all plants. Upright structures such as trellises and espaliers offer yet more gardening opportunities. Seated or standing, a gardener can tend fruit trees trained on an espalier, a vertical support structure for plants usually installed against a wall. In addition, space-saving vertical gardening provides many advantages including easier pest control and fruit or vegetable harvesting.

Modified soil containers such as raised beds, receptacles of all shapes and sizes and plant tables provide structure for plants to grow and around which gardeners can ambulate. Raised beds made of wood, stone, bricks or cinder blocks can measure 18 to 30 inches in height by four feet wide to ensure all-around accessibility by wheel-chair bound gardeners. Easy to install modular raised beds offer a variety of possible configurations and can be adapted to the gardener's requirements. They can be installed where plants don't usually grow like on a roof garden or over a cemented area or stacked in a limited space. Make sure soil is suitable for plant growth and easy to work. Select plants that are free of thorns, non-toxic and need little maintenance. Most plants require at least six hours of sunlight per day so if the raised beds must be situated in a shady location, select shade-loving plants.

Containers also allow wheel-chair gardeners to tend plants easily. Half barrels, large pots, planters, can be used as containers for shallow-rooted annual and perennial flowers and vegetables. Water must be able to drain properly. Plant containers can be suspended from above and brought down by a pulley system for easy access, set on wheeled platforms and clustered on decks, balconies or patios or used as old-fashioned window boxes. Plant tables are elevated shallow trays, movable or not and filled with soil or potted plants. Several people can work alongside these trays and enjoy gardening and conversation simultaneously.

Adapted, lightweight, ergonomic hand tools with attachable extensions with quick-release features can be special ordered. Keeping garden tools sharp will make the job at hand easier to complete and save time. Organization and planning could include storing inexpensive garden tools in plastic containers throughout the garden, keeping watering devices and other tools close to where they are needed. Use a variety of watering systems and organize yourself to minimize the number of trips needed for supplies. As you move around the garden, keep a few tools in a bag with you.

Before gardening, stretch and warm up joints. Don't forget a water bottle and protective clothing before beginning your work in the garden. Wear gloves, use knee pads, change position frequently and vary your activities. These may include weeding, clipping, dead-heading, watering, planting, spreading compost, repotting, clipping, seed-collecting, and herb-harvesting. Rest often on stools, garden chairs or benches placed throughout the garden and when possible, sit down to work. Choose a cooler part of the day to work in your garden. Rest when you've had enough. Remember, gardening is not a marathon.

There are excellent sources of information available about accessible gardening for gardeners with physical disabilities, and ordering supplies and tools. Janeen Adil's comprehensive book 'Accessible Gardening for People with Physical Disabilities: A Guide to Methods, Tools, and Plants' and Gene Rothert's 'The Enabling Garden: Creating Barrier-Free Gardens' provide a wealth of information on this subject.