

Garden your way to better health

By Melinda Myers

Break out the tools and garden your way to a healthier mind, body and spirit. Gardeners have always know it, but now research proves that gardening is a great form of exercise.

You'll work out all your major muscle groups when raking, digging and planting for an hour. Include gardening as a major component of your workout schedule. You'll stretch and strengthen muscles while promoting cardiovascular health and maintaining bone mass. A University of Arkansas study found that yard work as well as weight training more significantly maintained bone density than aerobics, dancing or bicycling in women over 50.



Heliotrope, nicotiana and other fragrant flowers can provide aromatherapy at the end of a stressful day.

Photo/Melinda Myers

And for those of us trying to lose weight, add 30 minutes of gardening to your daily or weekly routine to help shed some extra pounds. A half hour of raking burns 162 calories, weeding 182, and turning the compost pile a whopping 250 calories. Gardening several times a week will help keep you and your landscape looking its best. Anytime I can receive double or triple the benefit from my time and energy, the more likely I am to complete the task.

Protect your joints and muscles while gardening. Warm up, just as you would for any workout, with a few simple stretches. Protect your knees by using a stool, kneeling pad or one legged kneel (keeping your other foot flat on the ground and back straight) instead of squatting.

And no matter what shape you are in, drink lots of fluids to stay hydrated during and after you finish gardening. This is especially important with the extreme temperatures we are experiencing this summer. Try gardening early in the morning or evening when temperatures are a bit cooler. And time your work in garden beds when they're blanketed in shade.

Protect both your eyes and skin from the sun's intense rays by always wearing sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses. And consider regular checkups with a dermatologist to monitor for skin cancer.

Pace yourself so you can enjoy the process and smell the roses, heliotrope, daphne and alyssum along the way. Gardeners have been into aromatherapy long before its recent rise in popularity. A few strategically placed fragrant flowers can create a delightful welcome home, soothing scent in your secret garden or aromatherapy as you weed and tend your landscape.

Include some edible flowers and fruit for you, the birds and

the butterflies. Nothing beats the flavor or nutritional value of fresh-from-the-garden fruits and vegetables. Plus, watching the butterflies and hummingbirds sip on nectar from a fuchsia, coral honeysuckle, verbena or salvia as the finches feed on coneflower seeds will provide added beauty while the squirrels' acrobatic antics on giant sunflowers are sure to entertain.

If the task is too big or your time is limited, ask for help. Gardening can also be a great team sport. Or make it a round robin as you take turns gardening in each other's gardens. You'll all enjoy a day filled with gardening, conversation and laughter. What was once an overwhelming task suddenly becomes a chance to spend time with friends, enjoy the garden and create new memories. Sharing your knowledge, plant divisions or other talents like cooking or pet sitting may be the perfect trade for your friends' time and energy.

And as a wise person once said, "Planting a garden is a way of showing you believe in tomorrow."

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening." She hosts the Great Courses "How to Grow Anything" DVD series and the nationally syndicated "Melinda's Garden Moment" TV and radio segments.