

Avoiding back pain when gardening

Shovelling

- Position the shovel's blade so that it is level. Ideally, it should be parallel to your hip bones (pelvis) in the front, assuming your hip bones are level.
- Position your feet so that one foot is in front of the other. Now place your front foot on the shovel blade. Anchor your back leg into the ground to give you stability.
- Lean your weight forward onto the shovel. Let the weight of your body sink the shovel into the ground. *Leveraging the dirt or snow in this way will help you avoid muscle strain associated with digging or shovelling. Notice that the model in the picture is keeping her spine in a long line.*
- To begin lifting the dirt up, shift your weight to your back leg, using a gliding motion of the pelvis.
- Make sure you bend at hips and knees, and not the back. If you don't initiate the lifting from the pelvis you will be working harder than you need, and may cause yourself back or neck strain.
- Leverage the shovel out of the ground by bending the knees (especially the back leg) to lower your body down more. By lowering your body down when you lift the shovel up, you are positioning your centre under the weight you are trying to lift, and harnessing the power of the pelvis, hips and legs rather than the back.
- Move your whole body to where you want the dirt to go, and then just turn the shovel handle to let it fall there. As usual, any bending should be at the hips and knees to help you avoid using the vulnerable areas of your back to do the heavy work.

Weeding

Sitting on a bucket

- If you have knee, hip or back pain, sitting will help you avoid putting pressure onto those areas. But even sitting and weeding can take its toll on your back if you don't know how to move efficiently. Grab a bucket and I'll show you what I mean.
- Position yourself so that the weight of your body is supported through the bones.

- Locate your two sitting bones (on the bottom of your seat) and make a firm connected between them and the bucket.
- Keep your feet planted firmly and evenly on the ground.
- Spread your legs apart, and position your arm into your leg to help secure your sitting posture.
- In the wide-legged sit, you can support yourself as you begin to reach for the weeds. Just use your elbow on the inside of your knee to create an external brace for your body posture.

On all fours

- Keep your whole spine long and be aware of any pockets of muscle tension along your trunk. Once you become attentive to unnecessary tension, you can relax out of it.
- A long spine goes from the top of your head to the bottom of your tailbone, and includes the pelvis. Try imagining that your spine is a garden hose -- long and flexible.
- When you reach forward to grasp the weeds, push your body forward from your pelvis -- this way, the pelvis will support your weight and allow your shoulders to relax.
- Instead of yanking them out with your arms and hands hold onto the plant and pull your whole body back. To do this, aim the bottom of your pelvis toward your heels. Allow your hip and knee joints to softly fold as you bring your body back.
- Limit your action to just your trunk. To do this, find a comfortable angle for your shoulders and elbows and keep that angle -- place a constraint on yourself that you will not move them
- Monitor for tension in the shoulders, remember to keep your spine long. Steer any turning, leaning or twisting movements of your spine from your pelvis.

Standing and weeding

- Prop your elbow against your leg. This will create an external brace, which will help stabilize your body posture when you bend and reach for the weeds.
- Place your feet wide apart to create a stable base of support
- Keep your spine long. This means moving from the hips and not the back. Keeping flexibility at the hip joints will help you here.

- Try a short warm up before you begin gardening. Doing exercises like the pelvic tilt and a gentle lying twist with bent knees (if your back can handle it) will warm up those hips and ready them for a back-safe weeding session.
- And when you have to reach for a weed, try to stretch your torso out from your hips. This will keep your spine long.
- When you weed the garden from a standing position, your lower body needs to be stabilized in such a way that you can also shift your weight easily in every direction: forward, back, toward and away from each side, and diagonally
- If you plant your feet, especially your heels, into the ground, you will establish the stability that can support movements of your trunk and arms.
- Grasping weeds from the standing position is not just an arm action. Try to reach from your shoulder blade all the way out your arm and hand. This will help keep your spine long and may provide a good upper back stretch, too.

Wheelbarrow work

- First, position yourself so that you are lifting from underneath, including using an underhanded grip.
- That old adage, "bend from the hips and knees, not the back" comes in especially handy here. This is because when you straighten up, you will have leverage power to use that can save your back muscles from strain and injury. Once you are straight, keep a long spine and lean your body weight in toward the wheelbarrow to tilt it and empty out the contents.

When your garden wheelbarrow is loaded with soil or other contents, and it's time to dump it out, play it smart by bending from the hips and knees before you lift. Don't use your spine for this.

When you bend from the hips, you have the advantage of using very strong muscles to lift the load. By comparison, back muscles are much weaker; the structures of the spine are vulnerable to strain and injury.

Bending down will allow you to pick up the wheelbarrow from underneath, which is more efficient and will give you more leverage, now switch to an underhand grip. This will help you avoid wrist, arm, shoulder and neck strain when lifting the weight of the wheelbarrow straight up.

Because you've bent from your hips and knees to lift the wheelbarrow, you now have the power of those muscles on your side. Begin to straighten your legs.

To empty the wheelbarrow, straighten all the way. Lean your weight forward onto your front leg. Keep a nice long line from your head, through your spine down to the very bottom (your coccyx bone). A long spine will help protect your back from injury and strain.

The most important rule for saving your back when using wheelbarrows may be something you would prefer to ignore, but please don't: Do not overload the wheelbarrow. Overloading makes pushing harder, can cause you to strain your hips, and to lose your balance.