

Community Garden Health and Safety Handout:

Permaculture Principles for Back Care

Permaculture is about caring for the earth, for ourselves, each other and other living creatures. We usually apply permaculture principles to our houses and gardens or land, with ourselves in the landscape doing the work. But we can apply permaculture principles to design systems and strategies that help us look after our bodies, particularly our backs. Looking after our bodies and backs often helps us choose strategies that are also good for the earth.

Here are some suggestions based on the permaculture principles described by David Holmgren in his book, *Permaculture Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (Holmgren Design Services 2002).

Observe and interact

- Get to know your body – read about it, go to a slow yoga class, move one part and observe what happens to the other parts.
- Notice how you feel: if it feels like hard work or it hurts, there must be another way. Often, doing as little as possible to the garden or land is the best way to help the environment. So, for example, not digging helps your back and is good for the soil, planting perennials saves labour and aids soil fertility.

Catch and store energy

- The stronger you are, the more you can do in the world.
- Eat good food – especially whole grains and home-grown fruit and vegies
- Get plenty of sleep
- Build up your muscles.

Obtain a yield

Our yield from looking after ourselves is our feeling of wellbeing. It spreads outwards to other people and to our gardens and land. The better we feel, the more yield we're likely to get from our relationships, and from the garden or land.

Apply self-regulation and accept feedback

- Be disciplined enough to do a moderate amount of exercise
- Listen to your body: don't do anything that hurts or that wears you out
- Accept the ageing process: slow down if necessary.

Use and value renewable resources and services

- Have faith that your body knows how to renew itself. Usually, all it needs is reasonable food and water, gentle exercise, a bit of TLC from family and friends, and sometimes a session or two of physio or similar.
- If you have a bad back, understand that it will heal in time – be patient and gentle on yourself.
- Get help wherever possible, eg be open to suggestions from all types of healers, mainstream and alternative; ask for help with heavy lifting or moving or anything that might hurt your back.

Produce no waste

- Produce lots of waste! It's a sign of a healthy body.
- Eat lots of fibre Drink lots of water.

Design from patterns to details

Our backs and bodies are details within the big picture. We can design strategies to maximise our own wellbeing just as we can design systems and strategies for the bigger picture of maximising the well-being of the earth. Some suggestions:

- Have steep slopes terraced, if necessary, so you can stand upright to garden
- Keep garden beds small enough so you don't have to reach far to pick up things or weed
- Keep frequently picked vegetables at the front of the beds
- Plant perennials whenever possible to minimise labour
- Whenever possible, don't dig. Keep weeds down with mulch, or just loosen the soil around weeds without turning over.

Integrate rather than segregate

Human backs aren't designed to do everything on their own. Nor are human hearts!

- Share the weight/task
- Help to build community.

And remember that – like the rest of the earth – everything in our bodies is connected to everything else:

- Keep generally fit – walk, bike or swim
- Backs benefit from strengthening and lengthening muscles in our shoulders, arms, tummy, thighs, buttocks, calves, ankles, feet, even wrists!

Use small and slow solutions

Fitness and a strong back don't happen overnight. Be patient.

- In the garden and around the house, carry less weight at a time; take longer
- Only do a small amount of physical work before resting a while
- But, if you have a sitting task, get up and move about often.

Use and value diversity

Do a variety of tasks, working a while on each so you don't overdo the load on any one part of your body.

Use edges and value the marginal

Having good balance helps prevent falls. It also helps strengthen the same muscles that keep our spines in alignment.

- You could practice balancing on the borders of garden beds. Lots of edges mean lots of borders to balance on!

Is this a marginal point?!

Creatively use and respond to change

Our bodies change as we get older. If you have a bad back, that's a change too. We can look for solutions to ageing and bad backs that enable us to surrender to the changes without compromising our quality of life.

Some suggestions:

- Garden from a low stool, bending forward over your thighs
- Learn to lift using the strength of your thighs to minimise back strain.
- Use long-handled garden tools so you can stand upright as much as possible
- But long-handled pruners can be bad for the back. Either leave the pruning, or use a ladder and short-handled pruners
- Don't try to lift heavy things right up – lift a corner and shift them a bit at a time, use a sack truck, or get help
- Try to find alternatives to pushing a wheelbarrow, eg use weed sheets (keep them light and lift them in front of you)
- Store things as much as possible at waist height so you don't have to lift them up from low down or lift them down from overhead
- Work at a bench at a comfortable height for your back, rather than stooping or being uncomfortable on the ground
- Kneel or sit on a chair to pick fruit which is below shoulder height so that you don't have to stoop. Or you could spread your legs wide to bring your arms lower and keep your back straight. Wide legs also works for washing up in a sink that's too low.