

Gardening In Your Golden Years  
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*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: A low-maintenance planting, consisting primarily of groundcovers such as ferns and aspidistra, requires little regular care once established.*

**D**o you enjoy gardening but find that lately it's taking a lot more energy than you seem to have available, and your bones complain when you try to bend or kneel? Is it even worse when you try to get back up? If that is your problem you probably qualify for a senior citizen's discount. Admit it, you are in your "Golden Years"! You just can't work at the same pace and with the same physical effort you were capable of a few years ago.

Gardening has been a part of my leisure activity for many years. No matter how busy my life, I always made time for a garden. It was more than a hobby for me, it was an escape. Working the soil took my mind out of the daily turmoil and the physical effort was a great conditioner. However, now that I have passed the three-quarter century mark and enjoyed two knee operations in the past year I realize that I must make some adjustments.

Giving up gardening is not one of my options and I don't recommend it as a solution. Keep at it as long as you are physically able to do so. Here are some ideas to help conserve your energy, ease the burden on your body and still enjoy the many benefits of working in your garden:

Probably the most logical solution is to scale back on the amount of work it takes to

maintain your garden. This can be done by cutting back on the size of your cultivated areas and selection of easy to care for plants. For example, I no longer have a large vegetable garden. That space has been allowed to return to nature and provides great cover for a family of rabbits and a smorgasbord for the birds. It has been replaced by a group of small containers for herbs, and when I'm in the mood, a few tomato and pepper plants nestled among some other plantings.

My flowering annual beds have been replaced by low growing evergreen shrubs, perennial flowers, ornamental grasses, container plants, and ground covers. Perennial flowering vines cover a fence to provide the background. A few annuals planted in small clusters provide spots of color to compliment the permanent plantings. Native flowering plants like blue day flower (considered by some as a weed) are left to grow among the others. My favorite plants are the many camellias growing on the property. They are well established, almost totally carefree, and provide a great deal of pleasure. While I don't suggest this approach for everyone, it sure works for me.

Selection of plants can be a major factor in reducing your workload. Try to use plants that work well in this area, are relatively disease and pest free, and grow to the desired size. This will help eliminate replacing problem plants, reduce the need for pest control, and require less frequent pruning. You can also use foliage variation to provide color and texture to you garden rather than high maintenance flowering plants.

Consider your garden's irrigation requirements. Dragging a hose around a large yard can be a lot of work. Either use plants that do not require much water or keep your plantings close to a water source. Consider a simple irrigation system that will provide water only in those areas needed. I am currently working on a system that will handle both the container and in-ground plantings and allow tailoring the amount of water delivered to meet the individual requirements. It's not yet in operation but it looks promising. It consists of a dual drip type system fed by separate outlets.

Also consider acquiring some equipment that will help reduce the strain on your body. A good garden cart with large wheels that will easily cross rough terrain will be a big help. Common hand tools such as shovels, trowels, and hoes should be carefully chosen to suit your physical ability. My wife bought me a Kneeler/Seat to help my bum knees. It's great. I can use it as a seat when I am working on such tasks as pruning low plants or thinning. When I need to get down closer I can turn it over and it becomes a kneeler. Best of all the side pieces act as braces to help me push back up from a kneeling position. This is a very short list of tools, so check around you favorite garden centers to see what might be available to help with your specific problem.

Finally, don't forget the mulch. It is good for your plants, conserving moisture, protecting the plant roots from the heat and cutting down on weeds. It is a real labor saver. It is also attractive by itself as a cover for an area that may not be suited for planting, such as under

heavy shade.

Don't give up your gardening. Keep doing what you enjoy. Just recognize your limitations and find a way to compensate and let your garden be an enjoyable part of your "Golden Years".

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