

UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE GARDENS

Gardens benefit every person of any age or ability.

The basic tasks of gardening, however, can present challenges to a wide variety of people. A few simple strategies can help make the garden and the satisfaction of tending it more accessible to all.

Clear Pathways

The first step is providing paths into and around the plot. They should be firm, level and smooth, with less than 5 percent rise in elevation. The ideal width is about 4 feet wide. A textured surface, such as pea gravel, pavers or a non-slip mat, provides essential traction for wheelchairs. Be sure the soil beneath the path drains well so water doesn't puddle on it.

Raised Beds

Elevating planting spaces to 2 to 3 feet above the ground eliminates the need to bend over to tend the bed. You can build tall raised beds yourself from untreated wood, cinder blocks, or concrete. You can find ready-to-use galvanized steel, plastic, or wood options online and at garden centers and home improvement stores. When building beds, make them no wider than 3 to 4 feet, so gardeners can easily reach into the center from either side.

Container Gardens

Almost anything you can grow in the ground, can be planted in a pot. That means you can set up a "garden" of containers wherever these can be reached and enjoyed. Pots on pedestals or hanging baskets can help bring the plants to just the right level for gardeners with limited mobility. Container gardens need little or no weeding, but they typically require regular, sometimes daily, watering.

Close Seating

For many gardeners, a place to sit is more than a nice amenity—it's essential. Look for spots around the growing beds where you can install a seat or bench that will allow anyone on them to reach into the bed. The ADA (Americans with Disability Act) calls for outdoor bench seats to be a minimum of 17 inches high and a maximum of 19 inches high. Check garden centers and online sources for easy to move stools with wheels that let gardeners get close to the beds while seated.

Helpful Tools

New designs for shovels, hoes, and rakes equip gardeners of all abilities to work with these tools. Some are easier to handle because they are lighter than standard ones—they're typically made from fiberglass and aluminum rather than wood and steel. Others have ergonomic designs that make it easier to use them with little or no strain. You can find pruning tools that have ratchets, which gradually increase pressure for cutting no matter how much hand strength you have. For people who need to remain seated, there are trowels, cultivators, and other tools with shafts that extend from 18 to 30 inches or more, allowing them to reach into beds to use the tools.

Watering Aids

Hauling full watering cans or even garden hoses may be too challenging for gardeners with limited mobility or strength. Soaker hoses, or more expensive (but more efficient) drip irrigation systems, need only to be set up once and can deliver essential moisture to plants with just a turn of a knob. You can even find drip systems for container gardens. Best of all, these watering systems keep your utility bill down while ensuring plants have the resources they require at all times.

Sensory Support

Gardens are full of scents, sounds, and textures, as well as sights. When creating a space that will be inviting to all people, be sure to include plants with pleasing fragrances and some that are appealing to touch. Fountains and other water features and wind chimes add the element of sound to the garden. When you take into consideration what will enhance the experience of anyone who tends or visits the garden, you make it a more rewarding place for all.

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