

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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Carolina gardening is already in full swing by the time National Gardening Exercise Day rolls around on June 6. Gardening is great exercise - it uses all the major muscle groups and burns calories. Plus, it increases your flexibility and strengthens joints.

Here are some tips on how to get a good workout without causing sore and aching muscles.

First, take time to warm up 5-10 minutes with a brisk walk around the yard or garden, pumping or swinging your arms. Try to breathe rhythmically. Look around and see what needs to be done and appreciate what you've already accomplished.

Once you've warmed up, stretch 5-10 minutes before beginning your tasks. Stretching relaxes the muscles so they can work better. It can help prevent injuries, increase your flexibility and guard against soreness. Gently stretch your arms, shoulders, trunk, back and legs. Move fingers and wrists to warm and prepare your joints for work.

Hold stretches for about 30 seconds and don't bounce. Notice how you're breathing and don't hold your breath when stretching. Only stretch to the point of resistance - not pain - and hold the stretch there. Go further into a stretch as the muscle relaxes.

Now you're ready to go. Use a variety of motions while you work at a steady pace. Try to move your body into a new position every 15 minutes or so to avoid stiffness.

Changing your stance will also force you to use different muscles and help them become more balanced. For example, rake with the left foot forward and left hand on the lower part of the handle. Then switch to right foot forward with your right hand lower on the handle. For tasks like weeding, turning compost and digging, alternate between using right and left hands and arms.

To protect your back, use long-handled tools so you won't have to bend over. Always bend from the knees, not your back. When raking or hoeing, use your legs, shoulders and arms in a rocking motion. Try sitting when you use hand tools, and concentrate on using your waist, shoulders, and arms - not your back.

Remember to stop and stretch periodically while you work, and again for 5-10 minutes when you're done. After stretching muscles you've just worked, finish with a cool-down walk around the garden to admire your work.

Finally, don't overdo it, especially in the beginning of the season or when it's hot. Limit gardening to 1-2 hours - no marathons!

Gail Poulton is a Master Gardener Volunteer with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Rowan County. For archived garden columns or other information, visit the Rowan County Master Gardener web site at www.rowanmastergardener.com , e-mail Darrell_Blackwelder@ncsu.edu