

# Yardwork Safety

## Yardwork is great exercise.

Tilling soil, raking leaves, and removing brush can improve your endurance and strength, while spending time outdoors provides a sense of wellbeing and stress relief. However, it's easy to overdo it, and yardwork can also lead to injuries, from finger cuts to backaches. Just like with sports, muscles and joints become fatigued when used with too much force or repetition.

Following a few safety tips will help you enjoy your time outside, injury-free.

## Warm up

Like an athlete preparing for a game, your muscles do better with a warm up before beginning yard work. Start with a few large-muscle dynamic warm up movements, such as heel kicks, high knees, and shoulder circles.

## Rotate your tasks

After increasing blood flow into your muscles, think of the tasks in your yard as a circuit training and rotate light and heavy work, as well as the body parts used. For example, if you plan to rake, till and plant multiple beds, then rotate through the tasks for each bed. Multiple tasks allow you to change positions while alternating between heavy and lighter work.

While raking, tilling, or shoveling, try to regularly switch the side you hold the tool (10 on one side, then 10 on the other side).

## The right tools

Look for ergonomic tools, which means they are the right size and shape for your hand. A curved handle provides more leverage with less wrist stress because it is designed to fit the natural curve of the hand.

Maintain tools by keeping them sharp and oiled. A dull blade requires more effort and force, a common cause of injury. Use the right tool for the right job to keep the force needed to perform the task to a minimum.

## Protection

Gloves protect your hands against scrapes and infection and increase your ability to grip, which reduces the force needed. Gloves should be form fitted, and thin gloves allow for better dexterity. If you have arthritis or nerve damage in your hands, consider gel gloves (such as biking gloves) when using vibrating tools such as lawn mowers and weed wackers. The gel decreases the impact of the vibration.

Wear shoes with a rigid sole to prevent foot injuries when using spades or pitch forks. Good supportive shoes also help you balance better when the ground is uneven. In addition, good arch support reduces strain on your feet, legs, and low back.



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## Work in your comfort zone

The comfort zone is similar to the baseball strike zone (knees to shoulders at roughly an arm's reach distance away from the body). Try to minimize reaching, especially overhead.

Work with wrists in a neutral position: straight (in line with the forearm) and with thumbs facing up. Remember to hold objects with a light grasp or grip.

Minimize the time spent working with your head and neck in an extended position (looking up) while working above shoulder height or while working too far in front of you in a kneeled position (weeding). Work close to your body to keep your shoulders and neck in a neutral position. While weeding and planting try to lean on the arm you are not using, to transfer the force away from your back as you “close the chain.” Opposed to bending from the waist in an “open chain position” where all the forces accumulate in the low back.

If caring for ground beds is too physically demanding, use raised beds or containers. You can also use a gardening cart to sit on while gardening or use a knee cushion to make yourself more comfortable.



## Work smarter not harder

Avoid heavy lifting by dragging, sliding, or rolling heavy items. For instance, rake leaves onto a canvas tarp. When the tarp is full, drag it to your desired location. When transporting heavy plants, soil, or tools, consider using a cart, sled, or tarp. If you must lift, consider multiple smaller loads. And remember to lift with your legs, not your back.

## Cool down

After your day in the yard is done don't forget to do some gentle static stretching for your quads/hamstrings/shoulders and back. That way you will feel much better and less stiff the next morning. Staying well hydrated while gardening will also reduce sore muscles.