



1025 N. Main, Layton, Utah 84041

544-4333

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## Get Fit by Gardening

**Trying your hand at gardening may be a best-kept secret to getting and staying in shape.**

Gardening can be a great workout and boost for body and soul -- if you do it right.

Sharon Lovejoy, author of *Country Living Gardener: A Blessing of Toads*, relates that she started gardening as an infant. Her grandmother, not her mother, was the gardener in the family. "I think it often skips a generation," she says.

The key, Lovejoy says, is to see gardening not as a punishment but a joy. "You should feel lucky to be outside in the garden," she says.

And maybe healthier, too. And not just from eating veggies you grew yourself.

### **Aerobic Gardening**

Gardening provides all three types of exercise: endurance, flexibility, and strength.

Jeff Restuccio, author of *Fitness the Dynamic Gardening Way*, is a first-degree black belt but found he was getting more exercise playing in the garden with his kids. "I like gardening because it's purposeful," he says. "With food so cheap in the stores, you may not save money growing your own, but the chances are, if you grew it, your family will eat it."

He suggests making your gardening into a structured exercise routine, alternating light activities with heavier ones, then a light one, and so on. Rake for a while, then dig holes, then prune. "Exercise 30 to 60 minutes, then quit, whether everything is planted or not," he advises.

"Stretch first!" Lovejoy begs. "You'd stretch before going to the gym, wouldn't you?"

Restuccio also recommends concentrating on deep breathing while you work -- and increasing your range of motion, exaggerating the raking motion or the

digging motion. "You can use up 500 calories an hour that way," he says (official counts put gardening activities at the 100- to 200-per-hour calorie-burning level).

He also recommends raking right-handed 15 times, then left-handed 15 times.

"If you think double digging (going down a foot, turning the soil over, then down another foot, bringing that soil to the top) isn't exercise," he says, "you haven't tried it."

Gardening is something parents and kids can do together. "Never make cutting the grass or helping a punishment," she urges.

"When I go into the schools, I see so many more obese kids than I did 20 years ago," Lovejoy says. "I think parents are afraid to let them out."

You never know where those seeds, if you will pardon the expression, will fall or when they will sprout. "Many of us probably had to weed the garden," , "A lot [of people] come back to gardening later -- maybe when [they] purchase a home."

### **Gardening as Therapy**

The American Horticulture Therapy Association concentrates on the cleansing, calming benefits of being in the natural world.

- Lovejoy says studies have shown a link between ADHD and insufficient outdoors time.
- "Hospital patients also do better when looking at a plant rather than a cinderblock wall," she says. "Maybe that is how bringing flowers to the hospital got started."
- Older people, even those with memory problems, thrive in a community gardening situation, according to the AHTA.
- Special gardens have also sprung up for the blind, the wheelchair-bound (raised beds), and people with mental disabilities.

Just walking into a fragrant, warm greenhouse can change someone's whole mood, Lovejoy points out.

### **Getting Started and Keeping It Up**

When you walk away from the garden, however, it doesn't sit there like an elliptical trainer waiting for you to come back. It starts changing. The keys to making gardening a hobby you can maintain include:

- **Start small.** A 4-foot by 6-foot bed can produce a lot of tomatoes or cut flowers. Or you can garden in containers, just be sure they are large enough that they don't dry out too quickly. Containers are great for city folk and those without a back 40, also.
- **Be realistic.** Peonies are not going to live in Phoenix. Forget it. You need to learn your growing region number (check any catalog, because these will soon be a part of your life, too). Stick with plants with a chance of survival. Constantly killing inappropriate species can rasp on your last nerve.

- **Don't do one activity each time you go out there.** "Switch every 30 minutes," Mason advises.
- **Take regular breaks.** "I sometimes put a rock or something to show where I am quitting the weeding," Mason says. You can also set a timer.
- **Lift heavy bags carefully.** Remember the old saw: Lift with your legs. "Use your biggest, strongest muscles for the heavy stuff," Mason notes. She also says to watch the twisting. "We tend to lift a shovel of dirt, then twist to the side to dump it. Move your feet instead."
- **If you have allergies, talk to your doctor about it.** Lovejoy doesn't stop gardening, she takes a Benadryl. Mason points out that you can sort of de-allergize your yard. "Plants pollinated by bees tend to have heavier pollen that doesn't fly around as much," Mason says. "Wind-pollinated trees and plants tend to cause more trouble."
- **Don't throw poison everywhere.** This seems so obvious, but when people see a bug, Lovejoy says, they grab a can. "Usually a squirt of water to get the bug off the plant does the trick," she says. This goes for water gardens, too. Algaecides can cause an imbalance. Instead, cover the surface with as many lily pads as you can.
- **Don't flip for fertilizer, either.** "Fertilizers are like vitamins," Mason says. "What you have naturally may be enough." Better to feed the soil with compost, she says.
- **Check out all the new tools.** Mason says there are new implements for people with arthritic hands or people with carpal tunnel syndrome (which she has). "Certain gloves can improve your grip," she says.
- **If you are heaving off the couch to garden, take it slowly.** Sedentary people who suddenly start exercising vigorously risk injury.
- **Take a nice hot bath after gardening.** You've earned it!

Finally, "don't forget to enjoy your work," Mason says. "Garden benches are meant to be sat on."

Mason adds: "Go out in your garden every morning. Greet your garden. It will make you feel so good to start the day."

## **SODA AND OSTEOPOROSIS: IS THERE A CONNECTION?**

### **When Soda Displaces Milk**

Experts aren't sure why drinking soda is linked to osteoporosis. It may be simply that the soda is displacing healthier drinks in your diet. If you're guzzling a Pepsi with dinner (or breakfast!) you're probably not drinking the glass of milk or fortified orange juice that nutritionists recommend.

"There is an association between people who have high soda intake and risk of fracture, but that's probably due to the fact that if they have a high soda intake, they have a low milk intake," agrees Robert Heaney, MD, FACP, a professor of medicine at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., and a nationally recognized expert on osteoporosis.

"Those things have been shown to be linked in various studies. But when you look at the ingredients of the soda and give those to healthy people and measure what it does to their calcium composition, nothing happens at all."

"Individuals who drink a lot of soft drinks aren't going to drink as much nutritious liquid as others," says Bess Dawson-Hughes, M.D., professor of medicine and director of the Bone Metabolism Laboratory at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University. "We're simply not going to consume beyond a certain volume each day."

So, if you just remember to drink a glass of milk for every can of Diet Coke, you'll be fine, right? Not necessarily.

### **Soda and Osteoporosis: The Cola Connection**

New research indicates that there may be more to the soda and osteoporosis connection than simply replacing the good stuff with the useless stuff.

Researchers at Tufts University, studying several thousand men and women, found that women who regularly drank cola-based sodas -- three or more a day -- had almost 4% lower bone mineral density in the hip, even though researchers controlled for calcium and vitamin D intake. But women who drank non-cola soft drinks, like Sprite or Mountain Dew, didn't appear to have lower bone density.

### **Soda and Osteoporosis: Possible Culprits**

Phosphoric acid, a major component in most sodas, may be to blame, according to lead study author Katherine Tucker, PhD.

Phosphorus itself is an important bone mineral. But if you're getting a disproportionate amount of phosphorus compared to the amount of calcium you're getting, that could lead to bone loss.

Another possible culprit is caffeine, which experts have long known can interfere with calcium absorption. In the Tufts study, both caffeinated and non-caffeinated colas were associated with lower bone density. But the caffeinated drinks appeared to do more damage.

This study isn't the last word on the subject. Some experts point out that the amount of phosphoric acid in soda is minimal compared to that found in chicken or cheese. And no one's telling women to stop eating chicken.

### **Smart Steps for Soda Lovers**

Whether the apparent soda and osteoporosis link is due to effects of the soda itself or simply because soda drinkers get less of other, healthier beverages, it's clear that you need to be extra-vigilant about your bone health if you're a soda fiend.

"Soda drinkers need to pay extra attention to getting calcium from other sources," says Dawson-Hughes.

A few steps you can take to boost your bone health:

- Can't give soda up entirely? **Cut out one or two cans a day** (depending on how much you drink). The Tufts study indicates that it might help to switch to a non-cola soda (like Sprite or Mountain Dew).
- Better still, for every soda you skip, reach for **a glass of milk or fortified orange juice instead**. Not only will you be cutting back on any harmful effect from the soda itself, you'll be adding calcium. (If you're a diet soda drinker worried about calories, here's a plus: fat-free milk has even *more* calcium than higher-calorie whole milk.)
- Have a **breakfast cereal fortified with calcium** -- and pour milk on top.
- **Add milk instead of water** when you prepare things like pancakes, waffles, and cocoa.
- **Add nonfat powdered dry milk** to all kinds of recipes -- puddings, cookies, breads, soups, gravy, and casseroles. One tablespoon adds 52 mg of calcium. You can add three tablespoons per cup of milk in puddings, cocoa and custard; four tablespoons per cup of hot cereal (before cooking); and 2 tablespoons per cup of flour in cakes, cookies and breads.
- **Take a calcium and vitamin D supplement** if you aren't getting enough calcium (1000-1300 mg, depending on your age) in your diet.
- **Get plenty of weight-bearing and resistance exercise.**