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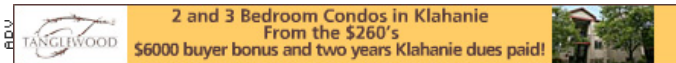
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## Breaking down barriers for an accessible garden

By Bill Thorness

Special to The Seattle Times

For many gardeners, hauling a bucket of weeds to the compost pile or planting a row of vegetable starts is easy. But for those who are mobility-challenged, such tasks can become painful or impossible, leading some to give up their beloved outdoor pastime.

The good news is that today there are gardening tools and techniques that make gardening accessible to almost anyone who wants to do it. It's a matter of design, smart shopping and creative problem-solving.

### Garden design

Whether you have a few pots in the backyard, a P-Patch or a large suburban lot, thoughtful design changes can make your space more accessible and easier to tend. Raised beds, pathway materials and resting spots are key considerations.

A raised bed can solve many problems, says the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA). "The size and shape can be customized to fit any location," notes the AHTA's raised-bed design primer. "Not only is it weed-free and wheelchair accessible, but the bed could brighten up a stark patio or sidewalk."

If built with flat, broad materials, a raised bed can offer seating space along its edge. Or, it can be built high enough that you can garden standing up. And if the bed is filled with premixed topsoil and compost, the resulting soil will be lighter, requiring less strength to dig than many yard soils.

"If you can get some of your favorite plants up to waist height, or even if you can raise the bed a few inches or a foot, it's amazing how beneficial that can be," says Sheila Taft, horticultural therapist for Cancer Lifeline in Seattle.

Raised beds can be hand-built, or purchased in kits from home-and-garden centers.



**enlarge** BILL THORNESS  
Back pain forced Lyn Waring to give up the ground-level plots at the Ballard P-Patch, but she can continue to garden thanks to raised-bed boxes.

### Learn more

#### Online forum:

<http://forums.gardenweb.com/forums>.  
Click on Accessible Gardening.

#### Gardener's Supply Co.:

[www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com) offers many tools mentioned in this article. Many are also available at local nurseries and home-improvement centers.

"**Accessible Gardening** for People with Physical Disabilities," Janeen R. Adil (Idyll Arbor, 1995).

"**The Enabling Garden:** Creating Barrier-free Gardens," Gene Rothert (Taylor Trade Publishing, 1994).



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The garden path offers another design opportunity. Material and grade are two primary concerns. "Pathways need to be a certain surface that will support you and wheels or whatever you're working with," says Taft. Loose gravel or uneven pavers can cause problems for an unsteady person or someone using a walker. Wheelchairs are difficult to operate on grass.

Changes in grade height must be addressed, too. The Americans with Disabilities Act provides standards for building ramps and stairs that can be applied to landscape design. Steps can be a barrier. "One or two inches can stop you from getting from here to there," says Taft. "You've got to have a smooth transfer from one height to another."

Handrails and benches placed strategically along the way also can help provide a safe trip to your favorite garden spot. Resting places in the shade are a must for the comfort of older gardeners or sun-sensitive people.

### Talking tools



A variety of gadgets has been appearing in the marketplace to increase gardening comfort. Chief among them are widely available hand tools that feature soft, foam-covered handles. The innovation is a boon for people with arthritis or those with less grip strength.

"Ratchet pruners" are recommended by Taft for the same reason. The grip contains a ratchet, which latches onto a cog with each squeeze. By making a number of small, consecutive squeezes, a person can cut through a branch without exerting a great amount of force.

"Anything with wheels" also should be considered to take stress off the body, she says. Weed or tool buckets can be pulled rather than carried. For people who need to sit when tending the soil, a bench with wheels is a great benefit. One brand, the Garden Scoot, puts a swiveling tractor seat above three or four sturdy wheels, and includes an accessory shelf below the seat.

Another innovation is the Garden Rocker, a seat mounted on a gently curved pedestal base that allows you to rock forward and back while seated to reduce low-back stretching.

To get up and down more easily, try a "garden kneeler." Folding handrails are attached to a foam-covered kneeling pad. The gardener uses arm strength to lower into a kneeling position, or to push back up to standing. Some models flip over and also act as a seat.

Tools that telescope or have long handles also increase comfort. Coil hoses, made with internal springiness, are lighter to extend and recoil on their own when released. Extension watering wands allow watering without needing to extend your reach. For hanging pots, a good innovation is to use pulleys to bring the pot down for watering.

### Plan now

Taft urges people to think of accessibility issues while they are "hale and hearty" so the garden can still be a source of pleasure if a sudden loss in mobility occurs.

"When people get ill, the garden gets away from them," she says. "I encourage people to start thinking about this in late middle age." By making changes over a few years, you can "basically try to make the garden more workable for yourself." It's a task that will return dividends in years to come.

*Bill Thorness is a freelance garden writer in Seattle: [bill@thorness.com](mailto:bill@thorness.com).*

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