**Gardening - Top Tips for getting your garden ready when you have sight loss**

**Taking care**

• Take time to warm up first with some simple bending and stretching exercises to loosen up your muscles and you will be less likely to strain yourself.

• On very cold days, it might be worth waiting until the air warms up before you begin or start work in a sunny area first.

• Stick to one job at a time and have breaks - with a warm or cold drink according to the weather. Stop work before you get too tired.

• You might find it easier to move your equipment around the garden in relay fashion, taking your chair out first, then your tools.

**Equipment and tools**

• If you have some vision, you’ll find your tools easier to spot if they have bright handles. Or you can paint the handles white.

• Most visually impaired gardeners like to work close to the soil and often use short handled tools. There is now a whole range of ‘multi-change’ tools with snap on interchangeable heads. Chose a handle length that’s right for you - 30cm (12 inch) is popular.

• Make sure you choose the right tools for the job. Try out tools before you buy them and check for weight and comfort. Choose well balanced and lightweight tools to help prevent stresses and strains in your hands and arms.

• If you have a weak grip, hand tools will be easier to hold if you slide some plumber’s insulating tubing over the handle, or there are specialist ranges with wide spongy grips.

• Find the best way for you to carry your tools. You could use a garden cart, wheelbarrow or bucket. A garden cart with an aluminium frame allows you to carry long tools and hand tools with smaller items in its tray. It also holds a refuse sack.

• Hand tools can be carried in a tool belt, apron or bag – whatever you find easy. Secateurs can be safely carried in a holster.

**Digging when you have sight loss**

Digging is when you turn over the soil to a spade’s depth or more. Digging helps break up the soil, to aerate it (get air into the soil), and it can help to loosen weeds.

**Top tips to make digging easier**

• When digging larger areas, some visually impaired gardeners find right-angle guides invaluable. These are homemade guides that can be laid on the ground and pegged to give you a set area to dig, fork, or rake.

• To level the soil after digging you can either work close to the ground with a hand rake and feel as you go, or stand using a long-handled rake and work within a right-angle guide mentioned above.

• Keep your beds narrow so you don’t have to step on the soil to reach. Also, consider opting for 1-metre square beds - these will give an edge to dig inside and also make planting easier.

• It will help if you can adapt your garden to avoid having to dig at ground level and to keep the amount of digging needed to a minimum.

Make narrow ‘no-dig’ beds by covering beds with a thick mulch such as newspapers and with a thick top layer of manure or compost. Worms and micro-organisms will help break the soil down and the mulch will help stop weeds growing.

Alternatively, lay down a weed-suppressing membrane in permanent beds and plant through slits cut in the material. Cover the membrane with a mulch such as bark or gravel.

• Consider using raised beds and containers. These bring the soil off the ground, reduce the need for digging and make any digging that you have to do much easier.

**Taking care**

• Digging can put a strain on your back, shoulders and arms so always ‘warm up’ with a few gentle stretches before digging, keep your back straight and only work for short periods, to avoid strain.

• Choosing a spade of the right length and weight will help you avoid some of the stresses and strains when digging.

• When working close to the soil, wear gardening gloves to protect your hands. Knee pads with straps to go round your legs are a good way to protect your knees.

**Equipment and tools**

• A lightweight border fork and planting spade are a good choice for breaking up the soil and digging. Check that the weight and length is right for you before you buy.

• A long-handled rake or a shorthand rake will help you level the soil after digging. Choose from the multi-change ranges where you fit different to tool heads to handles of the right length. A telescopic handle will also be useful for working at different heights.

• There are tools designed to break up soil using actions such as pushing, pulling and twisting – these are called Cultivation tools – and may be easier for you to use than a spade.

**Weeding with sight loss**

Getting rid of annual and perennial weeds keeps your garden beds tidy and your plants healthy. Weeds inhibit plant growth and compete for moisture in the soil. Once established, weeds become hard to remove without damaging your plants. You can lift weeds with a trowel, or tackle larger areas with a sharp-edged tool like a hoe, which cuts off shallow-rooted weeds.

**Top tips to make weeding easier**

• How do you tell a weed from a plant? Visually impaired gardeners often struggle with this, so plan your gardening to avoid weeding as much as you can.

• With some sighted help at first, you can practise recognising common weeds by touch. Some partially sighted gardeners find it useful to mark the soil in front of treasured plants with a bright item, like a yellow or orange felt-tip pen. This can stop you weeding them out by mistake.

• Get to know your favourite plants in your garden by touch and smell and you are less likely to weed them out by mistake. Planting in blocks or lines will help you to identify the growing plants from weeds.

• It will help if you can adapt your garden to avoid having to weed at ground level and to keep the amount of weeding needed to a minimum.

• Cover beds with a thick mulch such as newspapers and with a thick top layer of manure or compost. Worms and micro-organisms will help break the soil down and the mulch will help stop weeds growing

• Alternatively, lay down a weed-suppressing membrane in permanent beds and plant through slits cut in the material. Cover the membrane with a mulch such as bark or gravel.

• Consider using raised beds and containers. These bring the soil off the ground, reduce the need for weeding and make any weeding that you have to do much easier.

• If you plant out into clean, weed free soil the plants will grow away quicker than the weeds can germinate. In this way you will know where your plants are and any smaller plants that that come up are weeds.

**Taking care**

• Warm up before you begin and take plenty of breaks. Don’t struggle and strain to pull out deep-rooted weeds by hand and when working close to the soil, wear gardening gloves to protect your hands.

• Knee pads with straps to go round your legs are a good way to protect your knees or use a padded kneeler that you can move around as needed.

• Weeding with a trowel at ground level can put a strain on your knees, back, wrists and hands. Don’t do too much at once and take breaks.

• A full-length hoe can take a lot of strength to use and the chopping action can cause back strain and impact injuries to joints, tendons and ligaments. Do a little at a time and look for light tools that are easy to use.

Growing in containers when you have sight loss

Plants in containers add an instance lift to the look of the garden and for some gardeners they are the easiest way to enjoy gardening. You can use containers to give the right conditions for different plants – such as acid-loving types. A wide variety of plants including vegetables, herbs – even small fruit trees – can all be grown in containers to make the best use of limited space.

**Top tips to make growing in containers easier**

• Containers can be placed at different levels, so that you can sit to garden, or avoid bending.

• Save the work of lifting bulbs or tender plants by planting them in pots or wire baskets in the border.

• You will find it easier to water containers if you group them together. However, you can save watering time by putting containers where they will be reached by the rain. Water-retaining granules can really save on watering, and slow-release fertilizer is an easy way to feed.

• Decide what works best for you – high beds, called raised beds, that bring the soil surface close, or lower beds and containers that you can reach with longer handled tools.

**Taking care**

• Make sure there is good access all round your containers or that you can reach them comfortably.

• Container plants need a lot more watering and feeding than plants in the ground. Don’t have so many that you are exhausted with the effort. If you have lots of containers, you might want to look into automatic watering systems.

• Containers are also heavy to carry and move, so don’t be tempted to try to lift heavy pots by hand. Save straining your back by using a pot-mover trolley.

**Hints and tips**

• Plants in pots can be placed in beds and borders to change the display.

• Plastic containers hold moisture better than clay or earthenware and you can line hanging baskets with plastic to retain moisture.

• A layer of gravel or shingle on the top of the compost will improve drainage through the pot and reduce weeds.

• Add crocks in the base of the container under a layer of shingle for drainage. Saucers underneath your pots will help retain water, but remove these in the winter or during prolonged wet weather.

• Interesting trellis and plant supports extend the range of plants you can grow in containers and can act as useful screens.

**Equipment and tools**

• Choose frost-proof pots.

• New pot ideas are often shown at the big flower shows, so check magazines and your garden centre for ideas.

• Wheeled pot stands make the job of changing displays a little easier or use a pot mover trolley.

• Hanging baskets are best hung using a Hi-Lo pulley to avoid reaching up to tend them.