

Reader's Forum

More on Adaptive Horticulture Tools

The horticultural therapy staff at the Howard A. Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, New York Univ. Medical Center, frequently gets inquiries about the availability and use of adaptive horticulture and gardening tools for disabled clients. Some of these inquiries are from amateur gardeners, but some are from specialists who work with individuals with physical disabilities. We believe the notion of adaptive tools is somewhat misleading and needs clarification.

Our answer to these inquiries is always the same. There is really no such thing as adaptive tools or special equipment for disabled individuals who pursue horticultural activities. People with disabilities can and do use the same tools that are readily available to the general public through stores or catalogues.

Much of the confusion about disabled tools came about in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the growth of the field of horticultural therapy. At that time, a number of articles came out of Great Britain with subtitles such as *Leisure and Gardening and Equipment for the Disabled*.

The Reader's Digest published a book in 1972 called *The Easy Path to Gardening*, which was based on the gardening experiences in Great Britain with elderly and disabled gardeners. People often refer to these works when talking about adaptive tools.

Unfortunately, most people never

read these articles or the book. If they had, they would have seen that people with disabilities use the same tools as anyone else who has given some prior thought to their gardening needs.

With the resurgence in popularity of horticulture and gardening, the range of tools produced here and abroad has expanded tremendously. We can get tools now that are lighter in weight, for right- or left-handed use, have longer handles and more comfortable grips, and incorporate other features that make them easier for anyone to use. People who want to garden or pursue horticultural hobbies, including those with mild disabilities or impairments, can choose easily from a variety of tools and equipment that best suit their particular needs.

When it comes down to basics, the hand is the primary horticulture tool—the finger is a dibble, one's pinch is a pruner, a cupped hand is a trowel or scoop. Tools are meant to extend a person's capabilities and range and make things easier. Tools that are difficult to use or make things more complicated are bad tools for any gardener.

Individuals who are more seriously disabled, such as the patients we work with at Rusk Institute, require customized devices in order to perform even basic daily activities, such as dressing, brushing teeth, meal preparation, eating, writing, or picking up objects. These individuals require wheelchairs, splints, reachers, lapboards, prostheses, and other assistive equipment that enable them to function as independently as possible in all of their daily activities and vocational pursuits.

Using their own customized devices, most individuals with disabilities can garden and engage in horticultural activities with tools or materials that

are readily available. For example, quadriplegic individuals who are unable to grasp a spoon for eating will have special devices for their hands that provide grasp of a utensil so that they can feed themselves. By using this same device and an ordinary spoon, these individuals will be able to fill a pot with soil, add seeds, tamp the soil, add water with the spoon or a straw, and thus propagate their own plants. Individuals who have lost function in one side of their body, from a stroke as an example, find that most horticultural activities can be accomplished with only one hand with a little practice and some creative problem-solving.

The primary modifications that are needed to make gardening easier and more enjoyable for people with disabilities have nothing to do with adaptive tools. Adaptations have to be made in the planning, design, and organization of the garden and with the kinds of activities to be done.

The key is accessibility—accessible garden beds, pathways, water, and other materials—easy to get to and easy to reach. There is a growing body of literature about accessibility and ways to adapt gardens and activities so that people with disabilities, mild or severe, can continue to enjoy horticulture in safety and comfort. A close reading of the early literature from Great Britain actually makes these points very clear. These basic concepts can be applied easily to home gardens, greenhouses, and public areas.

One of the reasons gardening is so popular and brings joy to so many people is that it is simple, basic, inexpensive, and easy to do. No one, least of all individuals with disabilities, needs special equipment, sophisticated technology, or expensive materials to enjoy the benefits and rewards of horticulture.

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