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DIGGING' IN THE DIRT

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Ever notice your neighbor's well-kept yard? The details are hard to miss: grass that never strays taller than 2 inches, bright flowers that go unthreatened by overzealous weeds, colorful vegetables that peek out of bushes arranged in straight rows and, yes, the gardener with the smiling face and the well-developed muscles to show for it.

That's right — muscles. Gardening can burn an average of 300 calories per hour, and is an effective form of resistance training. Never would have thought it? Most people say they garden for the fun of it. However, according to the experts, moderate-intensity exercises such as gardening and walking, done most days of the week, provide a sufficient amount of physical activity to lower your risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Whether your goal is a manicured lawn or to be able to walk out your back door and pick the vegetables for dinner, there are a number of books in your local bookstore that can tell you what and how to plant, feed and maintain your garden or yard. Once that step is done, you can focus on getting both you and the ground in shape.

WORK THOSE MUSCLES

Remind yourself that the tasks of gardening require the use of muscles that may not have been active for a while. But if you start off slow, you can avoid the back strains and soreness that come from repeating the same motion for hours at a time. Plan on gardening three times per week for 30 minutes to an hour. To work on your upper body, try turning your compost pile and pulling weeds by hand. Raking and hoeing trains your biceps, triceps, deltoids, trapezius and latissimus dorsi, while digging targets your gluteus maximus and quadriceps. And you can get your heart pumping by taking a turn or two around the yard with a push mower. The right direction, and turn your body. Keep your knees bent and alternate, which foot you, lead with to help you focus on your movements. Concentrate on your breathing as well. Don't hold your breath, and be sure to exhale as you exert force. For example, exhale as you lift a heavy load, inhale as you lower it.

REAP WHAT YOU SOW

Gardening is something you can enjoy throughout your life. Go back to that image of your gardening neighbor. Remember the smile? Gardening is an activity that feeds the mind. So get outdoors, breathe fresh air, feel creative, tone your muscles and cleanse your thoughts. You're sure to reap the boundless rewards offered by the sight of the first blooms, or the taste of the vine-ripened vegetables you've nurtured to maturity.

OH, MY ACHING BACK

A little prevention goes a long way when it comes to avoiding sore gardening muscles. It is essential that you use proper form when gardening. Start by warming up with a short 10-minute walk to prepare your body. Next, remember to use good posture and positioning to avoid injury, and keep all of your motions smooth and steady. No matter what activity you are performing, always keep your abdominals firm to help maintain good back alignment. An aching back is a common post-gardening complaint. This can be remedied by using your legs, not your back, and keeping your knees flexed when lifting wheelbarrows or heavy planters. When digging with a shovel, don't twist your back. Instead, lift your front foot point it in

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