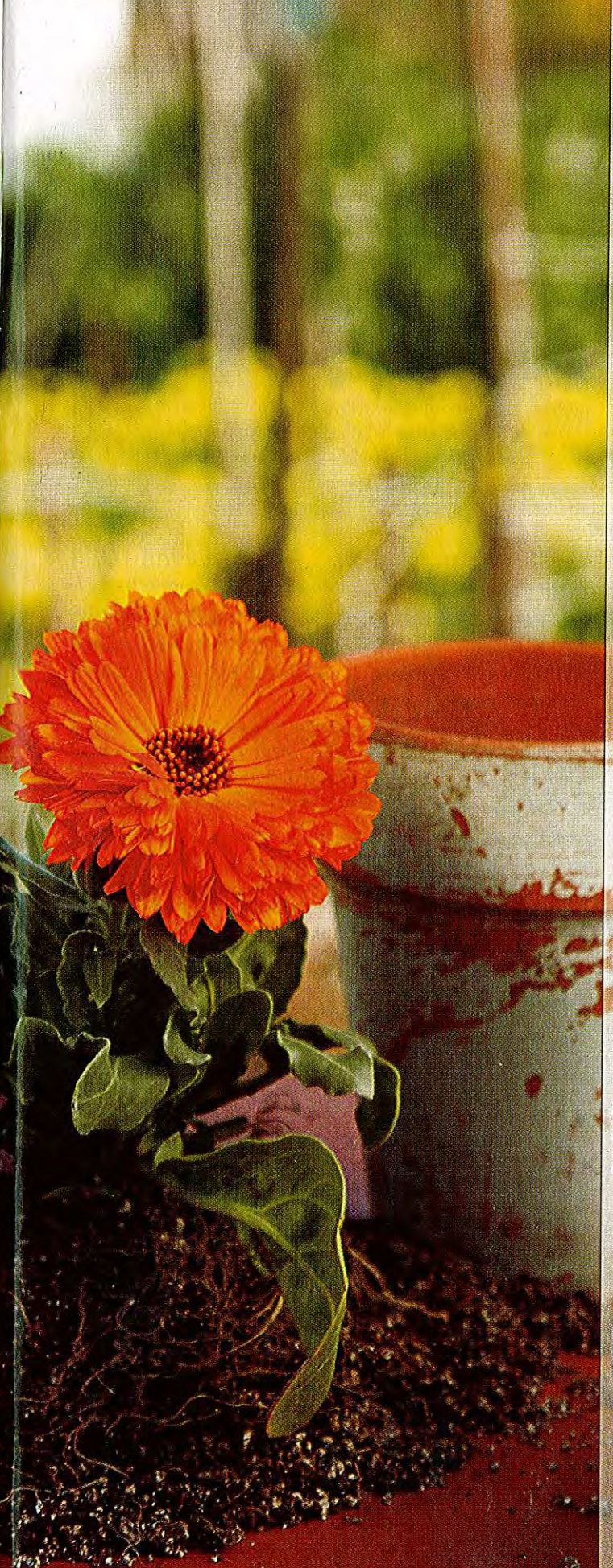
Don't let arthritis pain force you to give up on gardening. Grow a bounty of color this season with clever tips, tools and techniques.

BY GLENDA FAUNTLEROY

Get Back IN THE Garden



WHEN THE HARSH WINTERS OF BUFFALO, N.Y., FINALLY GIVE WAY TO WARMER TEMPERATURES, Christina Hartz can't wait to return her backyard flower garden to full bloom.

"I started my garden three years ago, and it's so nice to play in the dirt," she says. "If you're having a good day and can get out there and weed, pick and focus on what flowers you're going to put in the bed, it's very calming and relaxing."

Hartz, 30, has fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis that cause serious knee and hand pain. She admits that when she started gardening, she underestimated the amount of work it would take and the pain it could cause.

"I thought it would be easy to get the weeds out, dig up the dirt and plant the flowers. I was so wrong," she recalls. "I think I got halfway through the garden bed and couldn't move for a few days."

Hartz says she's learned to pace herself and use smart gardening tools and techniques that are gentle on her body. "I have a heavy cushion to protect my knees when I dig," she says. "It still hurts after I've been kneeling for a while." As a result, Hartz now takes frequent breaks and limits her gardening to about an hour a day.

Heidi Sibert understands her challenges. Sibert, a landscape architect in Vernon Hills, Ill., designed seven of the Arthritis Foundation's Enabling Gardens – using raised beds, lightweight containers, hanging baskets and adaptive tools – that were featured in Chicago's Annual Garden and Flower Show. And Sibert has adapted her personal garden to accommodate her pain from psoriatic arthritis, which was diagnosed 20 years ago.

We asked Sibert, as well as two physical therapists who treat patients with arthritis pain from gardening, to share the tips and tools they recommend to their clients and patients. Here's what they had to say.

FOR THE GARDENER WITH ...

Hand Pain

WHAT TO PLANT

Sibert says gardening with hand pain calls for plants that require less pruning or that maintain their shape more easily, such as boxwood, holly and yew shrubs. Ground cover like English ivy is also a smart choice as it will spread and shade out potential weeds.

MUST-HAVE GEAR

Wanda Evans, a physical therapist at Kaiser Permanente of the Mid-Atlantic Region in Washington, D.C., says ergonomic garden tools can reduce hand pain while increasing the efficiencies of gardening tasks by providing better transfer of power from your hands to the tool. She recommends tools with handles that are extra thick and grippy.

- **Radius Hand Tools and Pro-Lite Digging Tools.** The thick, curved and contoured handles on the hand tools minimize hand and wrist stress. The "O" grip on larger tools has four times the gripping surface of traditional straight-handle tools, for increased leverage and to let you find the most comfortable hand position. $30 each, www.radiusgarden.com
- **Gilmour Adjustable-tip Ergo Nozzle.** This nozzle for your hose has a soft, thick, ergonomic grip to reduce hand fatigue and stress while watering. It also has an easy-to-turn dial to control water pressure.
- **Bionic Gardening Gloves.** Designed by an orthopaedic hand surgeon, the gloves' Velcro-and-neoprene wrist straps help support the wrists. Silicone-tipped thumbs and fingers provide protection and increased grip. $30, www.bionicgloves.com

Hip OR Back Pain

WHAT TO PLANT

Raised gardens – including wall gardens, window boxes and waist-high gardening beds – reduce the strain on the body. "It's all about doing whatever you can to bring the plants up higher so that you don't have to bend," says Sibert.

Because space is typically limited in raised gardens, vertically growing herbs, vegetables and flowers – such as tomatoes and daffodils – help maximize the space.

MUST-HAVE GEAR

Look for tools that eliminate excess bending and reaching, including watering wands, says Judy Burlingame, a physical therapist in Englewood, Colo. Some other gadgets include:

- **Pleated Wall Hangers.** Hang these simple planters on your fence or wall at any height comfortable for you and plant your favorite herbs or flowers. Made from recycled felt that will not decay as plants grow. $65 to $195, www.plantsonwalls.com
- **Standing Garden.** Garden without bending or stooping with this cedar bed that sits on aluminum legs. It also has a 4-gallon self-watering tray. $149, www.gardeners.com
- **Vertical Grow Bags.** Grow vegetables, greens and herbs in these inexpensive hanging bags. Insert your plant, add soil and water. Topsy Turvy is one popular manufacturer. $9.95, www.amazon.com

Knee Pain

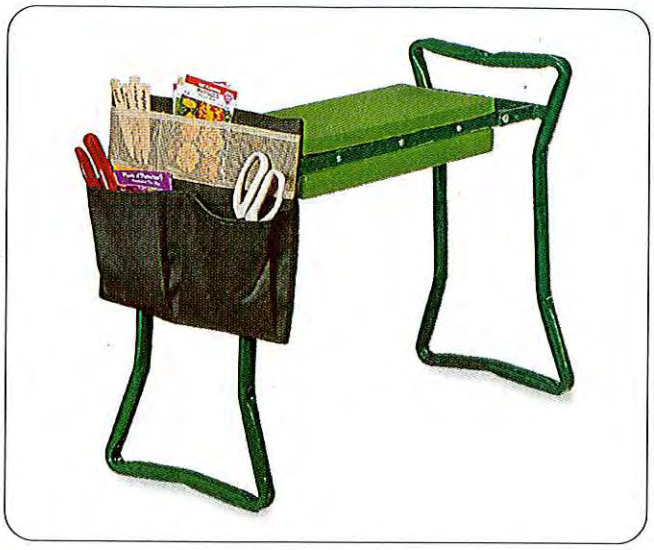
WHAT TO PLANT

Sibert says container gardening is a good choice for those with knee pain, because it reduces the need to squat, kneel and carry heavy supplies that put unnecessary weight on joints and cause an awkward stride.

A simple cluster of medium to large planters, made from lightweight yet durable foam, work well and can be placed on a patio to ease accessibility and can be maintained while seated on a chair or stool. Many small flowering plants, herbs and vegetables, such as ornamental peppers, and even small shrubs and trees, such as Japanese maples, fare well in containers.

MUST-HAVE GEAR

A small stool to sit on, or a well-cushioned kneepad – if you must kneel – can keep container gardening a relatively pain-free hobby. And if you don't have a hose, a self-watering system keeps you from lugging heavy watering cans, or walking around your garden when your knees are sore.



- **Ames Lawn Buddy.** Sit and scoot around the garden while keeping your tools within reach. The Lawn Buddy is a convenient way to carry and store small garden supplies, and the handle folds down for a comfortable seat. $47, www.amazon.com
- **Garden Kneeler.** Soft foam cushions knees when you kneel, and the handles help decrease strain by providing better hand and arm leverage when you lower and lift yourself for weeding or planting. Flip the kneeler over and it becomes a convenient bench. $35, www.gardeners.com
- **Plant Sitter System.** A 1-quart reservoir hangs on the edge of your container while small hoses and watering cones automatically deliver water to your plants based on the soil's dryness. $23 for sitter and three watering cones, www.gardeners.com

Glenda Fauntleroy is a freelance writer in Carmel, Ind.

Find out what plants to put in a low-maintenance garden at **www.ArthritisToday.org/JA10**.

STRETCHES FOR GARDENERS

Gardening can take a toll on the body, especially if you have arthritis. Minimize the aches with these basic moves and stretches from Wanda Evans, a physical therapist at Kaiser Permanente of the Mid-Atlantic Region. Do them before and after you garden, she advises, and remember not to pull on your joints too quickly or aggressively.

HAND STRETCH: Hold right hand up in front of you with palm toward your face. Touch the tip of each finger to the tip of the thumb. Move from one finger to the next. Index finger to thumb, middle finger to thumb, ring finger to thumb, and so on. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

NECK AND BACK STRETCH: Lie on back with knees bent and feet flat on floor. Interlace fingers and place hands behind head. Let both knees fall over to the right as you turn your head to the left. Hold 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times, alternating from one side to the other.

HIP STRETCH: Lie on back with knees bent and together with feet flat on floor. Open knees apart like a pair of scissors. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. Close knees back together, using hands to help if necessary. Repeat 10 times.

QUADRICEPS STRETCH: Hold the back of a chair with one hand and bend the opposite knee. Hold your leg just above the ankle and pull gently toward the buttocks. Keep your abdomen tight and hold for 10 seconds. Relax and then switch legs.

In addition to stretching, being physically fit can make gardening even more pleasant – and productive! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta recommends 2 ½ hours of moderate-activity exercise – such as brisk walking – per week. It will help keep joints limber and muscles strong, reducing the risk of injury while tending your garden.