

Get Fit to Garden

Your body is your best gardening tool, say *GardenFit* hosts Madeline Hooper and Jeff Hughes. Learn how to work stronger and longer with their easy-to-incorporate strategies.



Meet our experts

After her gardening passion left Madeline Hooper with aches and pains, a friend referred her to Jeff Hughes, an award-winning fitness trainer who taught her moves that enabled her to garden more enjoyably. These newfound habits were the inspiration for their *GardenFit* show on PBS and Get GardenFit workshops.

Planting, pruning, picking, and weeding are a workout. And like an athlete in training, you want to condition your body so all that bending and lifting don't take a toll. "I go by three main principles—balance, form, and habit—which are about teaching yourself to move through the garden in a new way," Jeff Hughes says. Get started with the duo's top tips for taking care of your body while tending your garden.

1 WARM UP
"To prep your body for all the movements you'll be doing, it makes sense to do some basic warm-ups before starting any tasks," Hughes says. Pay special attention to your shoulders, back, hips, and knees, he adds, as these are the areas that experience the most stress.

2 FIND BALANCE
You can do a few of your favorite stretches or check out the recommended moves, opposite. Focus on being balanced in terms of spreading the workload across both sides of your body and using all your muscles and joints. And always be mindful of engaging your core to help stabilize you. "Practice being ambidextrous," Hughes says. If "you're taking something out of the wheelbarrow, for example, switch sides so you twist your body in both directions or use your nondominant hand to dig a hole so you don't overwork one set of muscles. Sound impossible? Give it some time. "After a few weeks, using your nondominant side will become second nature," says Madeline Hooper.

3 FOCUS ON FORM
No matter what you're doing, whether it's pruning a bush or deadheading flowers, maintain good posture. Keep your chest up, shoulder blades down, and your head in line with your spine. Hughes says, "Think about a Greek statue—no one is slumping over. Keep that upright form as you lift, move, push, and pull." If you start to feel an ache, pain, or strain (which generally happens when you get tired and begin to droop), either take a break and rest or switch to another task.

4 BREAK THINGS UP
Gardeners tend to get focused on a particular area or movement (like weeding a bed) for a long time and then overdo it, Hooper says. Keep an eye on time and don't spend more than

30 minutes on any single task. Rotate between garden chores (weed for a bit, then plant some, then prune) to lower the risk of overuse of a muscle group.

5 LIFT SMART
When you haul weighty objects (like a clay pot), remember the time-honored axiom to engage your core and use your legs, not your back, to lift. To be extra efficient, do what Hughes calls the "armchair" (see the details, opposite). Stand close to whatever you're lifting. Place your hands on either side of the object; as you lift it and rise to a semi-squatting position, pull the item toward you. "Think about making the object part of you—your body will help carry its weight," Hooper says. Lifting with one hand? Place your opposite hand on your leg for support as you pick up the object.

ILLUSTRATIONS: AGENCY: HEIKLE/DOWN AGENCY



Yawning Stretch

GOOD FOR easing chest and shoulder tightness. **HOW TO** Stand tall with hands at your sides. Take a deep breath in, stretching both arms out to the sides and drawing your shoulder blades back. Hold here for a count of five, relax and repeat.



Armchair

GOOD FOR lifting and lowering objects, protecting your knees and lower back. **HOW TO** Stand with your feet a little wider than the hips. Squat until elbows rest on your legs. If you're lifting or lowering a heavy object, hold it close to your body and get into this position before moving the item.



Hip Flexor Stretch

GOOD FOR improving flexibility and reducing lower back pain. **HOW TO** Begin with feet together. Slowly step right foot back until left knee is bent 90 degrees (or as far as comfortable). Feel the stretch along front of right hip. Hold for 30 seconds; drag the leg back up, switch sides, and repeat.



Torso Twist-Stretch

GOOD FOR warming up, balance. **HOW TO** Step slightly back with your right foot. Keeping left arm by your side, slowly bring right arm in front of you, palm facing up. As you gently twist torso to the right, raise right arm above shoulder then behind you; lower right arm to side as you turn your torso back to front. Repeat 10 times on each side.



Armchair Spideys

GOOD FOR warming up. **HOW TO** From the armchair position, left, straighten right leg, shifting weight to left side, reaching right arm to touch the ground in front of bent (left) leg. Shift weight and do the same on the left side. Go from side to side 10 times. You should feel the stretch in your legs and lower body.



Seesaw

GOOD FOR reaching, twisting, and bending tasks (pruning, cutting). **HOW TO** When you reach your arm in front of you to do any task, pull your shoulder blades down and back. This takes the pressure off your outstretched arm and reinforces good posture. ■

All the Right Moves

Use these stretches and strengthening exercises to prep your body for all the work you're doing in the garden.