

# *Gardening Body Sense*

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*Don't sacrifice your body  
for beautiful blooms*

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*By Lionel Crockett*

# Gardening Body Sense

## Introduction

There must be literally thousands of books written on virtually every topic imaginable in the garden:- lawn care, plants, compost, patios, tools, shrubs, weed killers, organic gardening and pest control, the list is endless. Yet, there is precious little written about the most important factor in gardening, I mean **YOU** the gardener!

It is disappointing when plants die or when a tool breaks, but you can at least go to the gardening centre and buy a new one, **YOU** are not so easily replaceable.

## Gardening & Exercise

When spring arrives we are filled with enthusiasm and anxious to get into our gardens for the new season, we are about to embark on a physically demanding activity and, unless we have been engaged in similar physical pursuits during the winter months, our limbs and muscles have become stiff through lack of use. Therefore it makes sense for us to prepare ourselves for the tasks ahead.

Begin with a few gentle exercises such as bending your knees a few times and lowering into a squat position; swing your arms, roll your shoulder blades, loosen and get the blood flowing. Wear loose, comfortable clothes.

Now that you are fully prepared, it is time to tackle the garden but do remember body care is far more important than anything else you undertake. Let us have a look and see how we can enjoy our gardening without undue aches and pains.

Posture is a word to keep in mind at all times during gardening for, without good body posture we are asking for trouble. Good posture makes

gardening enjoyable and the results of bad posture will make you wish you hadn't started. Let us look at a few essential aspects of good posture in a little more detail.

Firstly, it is important that you keep your back as straight as possible whether standing to hoe, bending down, kneeling or squatting. When lifting weights, bend your knees and exert force from the knees rather than from the arms and shoulders. Use body weight for pushing, using the arms and shoulders as a secondary force. Bend as little as possible, sitting is better as well as being more comfortable, change jobs fairly frequently. Use a push-pull type hoe, which does not require lifting between strokes. Sit facing the task you are undertaking and do not twist the body, particularly if you are bending over.

## What is Ergonomics?

Now you are aware of how to take good care of that precious body of yours, let us consider some of the gardening tools designed to make life easier for you and which can do more work for less effort. This seems almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

The secret is ergonomics, this may sound very technical but it is not really. Ergonomics is the study of the relationship between people and the furniture, machinery and tools they use at work. The object of the exercise is to improve work performances by removing sources of muscular stress and general fatigue.

Let me give you a few simple examples that you can readily appreciate: do you remember the old type of can openers? They usually had a wooden or metal handle and a sharp pointed spear at the other end. You plunged the spear into the can by thumping the handle with the palm of the hand, almost crippling

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yourself in the process, then ploughed around the edge of the can leaving a dangerous, ragged edge. You succeeded in opening the can ... but how did your hand and wrist feel afterwards? These days you clip a modern can opener over the edge of the can and rotate a winged handle, the result is still an open can but with a neat, safe edge achieved with considerably less effort and a much happier hand. This is an example of ergonomics.

Another example would be the old 'T' shaped cork screw, after screwing it into a cork you would hold the bottle, probably between the knees, with one hand and pull with all your might with the other. With luck the cork was removed and you deserved a drink after all that effort. The modern bottle opener relies on leverage and not a strong, right arm to supply the force and energy needed to extract the cork. That's ergonomics.

### Garden Tool Design

Now find out how ergonomics apply to gardening tools. When purchasing your tools, always buy the very best you can afford. Any craftsman or engineer will tell you that cheap tools are a false economy. They are usually of poor design and quality and need to be replaced fairly frequently. We get what we pay for. Good tools make excellent gifts for birthdays and special occasions. They are a practical gift and will not gather dust on the mantelpiece.

Stainless steel tools are best as they do not rust, they stay sharp, are easier to clean and soil will not adhere to them as much. Many modern hand tools have plastic handles moulded to give a more positive grip than conventional wooden ones. Hand tools are easier to use if they have a large, wide handle to grip. Brightly coloured handles make it easier to find misplaced tools.

The main point to consider when buying tools is quality. Will it rust? Will the handle come loose? Will it suffer if you leave it out in the rain? Check for strength of construction and safety. Another very important consideration is design; tools should be light and well balanced. Remember that modern ergonomic tools may look different from old conventional ones (the new and old type can openers look totally different).

Take Peta's **Easi-Grip®** hand tools for example. They have the handles at 90° from the working end of the tools, thus ensuring that your hand and wrist are in a neutral, stress-free position while working. Conventional type tools have the handles 'in line' with the tool.

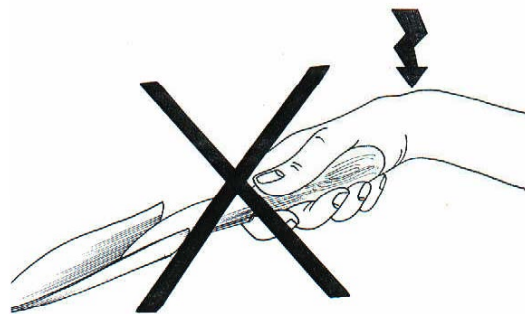


Figure 1 : Strain caused by using "in-line" tools.

This can cause stretched tendons on the upper wrist and compressed tissues on the lower wrist, they also require to be pushed into the ground, with the palm or ball of the hand which could cause hard skin or even blisters. **Easi-Grips®** prevent this from happening and the work requires less effort for the same results.

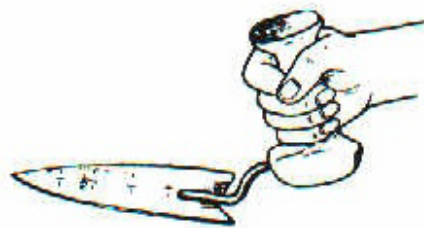


Figure 2 : Correct hand angle

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Long shafted tools such as hoes and rakes again should be light, well balanced and long enough for you to work in an upright position. You should avoid excessive twisting and bending particularly when using a rake or hoe.



Figure 3 : Excessive bending and twisting can be caused when using long shafted tools.

As previously mentioned a 'push-pull' type of hoe that does not require lifting between strokes is an excellent tool, particularly if fitted with the **Easi-Grip®** Add-On Handles to keep the hands in a neutral position.



Figure 4 : Improved working position using Easi-Grip® Add-On Handles.

When using long shafted tools, always have one foot in front of the other with the rear knee slightly bent; this enables you to rock your weight from one foot to the other as you work.

It is also a good idea to fit additional handles to forks and spades, which greatly assists lifting, keeping the hand and wrist in a neutral position.

There are a number of good kneeler/stools available on the market, which include a cushion to kneel on and arms to push yourself onto your feet. The height of the seat is ideal to sit and work with Long Reach tools. They bring a degree of comfort to gardening and we are all in favour of that.

Many tools are now being designed for the elderly and less able and these can make gardening easier and more enjoyable for us all – *irrespective of our age and ability*. Good, ergonomically designed tools benefit all of us if we take advantage of them. Don't think, "My tools were good enough for my granddad, so they are good enough for me". Design has come a long way in the past thirty years or so and a lot more thought has gone into making tasks easier and preventing those all too common aches and pains.

The best tools in the world won't protect you from these strains if you forget your body sense and adopt a bad posture. Pace yourself and work for only an hour or two to begin with, you don't have to do everything during the first week.

Happy gardening ... and take good care of yourself!

*This paper was written by Lionel Crockett, an innovator and entrepreneur who founded Peta (UK) Ltd and designed Easi-Grip® garden hand tools as well as many other ergonomic tools and assistive devices all sold under the Easi-Grip® name. For details please visit [www.easi-grip.com](http://www.easi-grip.com) or call 01245 231 118.*