

Accessible Gardening

A simple definition of Accessible Gardening is making gardening available to everyone who wants to. We all have limitations - we just don't think we have any. Some typical limitations include: kids or me (height challenged), tall persons (low challenged plus low head spaces), loss of flexibility or strength, shortness of reach, mobility (even temporarily with a sprained ankle or broken arm), getting up and down, lifting, bending, diminished sight or hearing, and loss of memory. Each limitation requires imagination in the way we address it.

The purpose of this article is to generate ideas for how you can create your own accessible garden. Four ways to do this include: design, plant choices, tools and methods.

What are some ways we can address limitations using **better design**?

- Entry to the garden – does a gate need to be higher, lower, easier to open? Inward or outward?
- Floor surfaces – does it need to be smoother with fewer obstacles? Does it need ramps and railings? Are you dealing with a slope and need to level the ground? Good surfaces might include mortared pavers, sealed crusher fines, concrete. Bad choices might include gravel, bark, or some pavers that create tripping hazards with height variations.
- Garden beds – what heights, shapes, and depths, wheelchair accessible (roll into like a U or roll under like a tabletop), vertical wall using boxes, painted pallets, or even gutters on a fence at different heights, lower for kids or higher/raised for people with bending issues or tall person? Where will the beds drain, onto someone's lap? Can the gardener reach across the bed comfortably?
- Containers – horse troughs, large pots, groupings, square, rectangular, round? Ease of moving the containers around seasonally. At different heights – note that containers are one of the easiest ways to build to a specific height.
- Garden Ceiling - do we need a shade structure or trellis using plants to provide shade? Hanging pots that can be raised then lowered for watering?
- Space – do we need more space between beds? easier access to water? turn around areas for wheelchairs or walkers?
- How will we water the plants? Overhead drip tubing with emitters for hanging pots? Bubblers or sprays for individual plants, plant groupings, pots? Perforated tubing or soaker hoses for beds? Flexible coiled hose, more hose bibs, hose guards? Type of nozzle? Timers? Access to more/closer water sources? How high does the water source need to be for access?

Plant choices are another way to address limitations.

- Color, shape, smell, texture – bright colors, familiar shapes, pleasant smell, and noticeable texture for visual impairment. Herbs provide familiar smells.
- Familiar plants and smells can comfort someone with memory loss
- Compact size for raised beds or easier harvest, easier reach e.g. determinate or bush tomatoes grow lower than indeterminate tomatoes
- Vines or plants that grow vertically for shade or trellising such as pole beans
- Lettuces, radishes, carrots for low beds.
- Perennials versus annual - less planting required and less cost?

Tools are another way we can deal with limitations and the choices keep expanding as new tools are developed.

- Ergonomic hand tools like trowels, transplanters, weeders, cultivators (Fiskars, Radius are good sources)
- Hand pruners and loppers, Fiskars PowerGear bypass pruners roll with each cut to reduce strain on the wrist and provide increased force
- Stand up weeders such as the Fiskars claw weeder, Rogue hoe
- Waste cleanup tools like the Fiskars collapsible garden bag
- Extendable hand rakes that easily reach under shrubs
- Extended reach tools such as the cut and hold pole pruner from Corona that allows you to hold onto what you cut
- Pole pruners and pole saws that allow you to work from the ground.
- Portable bucket for tools keeps tools together
- Tool belts at waist level reduce the need to bend over and reach down
- Rolling garden carts – allow you to sit thus reduce the need for bending down. Some hold small tools and even allow you to scoot without getting up!
- Cushioned grips on your tools - purchased or home-made, makes for easier gripping
- Foam knee pad - protects knees from gravel, bark
- Foldup benches/kneeler can put you at the right height and can be carried around the garden
- Hose nozzles such as the trigger-squeeze models are easier on the hands especially those with a lock mechanism (think gas pump nozzle)

Methods or the way you do something can reduce limitations.

- Placing plants that need to be harvested more often closer to the house, so you have less distance to travel. With a smooth path surface nearby, you can roll a cart easily.
- Painting tool handles bright colors so they can be found more easily.
- Keeping hydrated to reduce fatigue and heat issues
- Wearing loose fitting, breathable, comfortable clothes
- Using low maintenance plants.
- Using grids to assist with visual impairment – create a matrix for planting with string or wire.
- Providing good signage for what's being grown helping you to remember what you planted.

Any garden can be made more accessible just by using your imagination. If you are interested in creating and maintaining an accessible demonstration garden in High Desert, please contact me.