

Weeding Out Tension: Stretches for gardening and yard work*

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It's ironic that the very activities that are part of what makes spring and summer so enjoyable -- getting outside, tending the garden, bringing the yard back to it's full-color life, are also activities that can cause debilitating aches and stiffness. Not exactly the way to kick off the warm season! Fortunately, there are easy steps you can take to thwart this unwelcome side effect.








Generally, there are two categories of stretches when it comes time to gardening (or readying the body for almost any activity): the stretches you perform outside of the task itself -- building the base, if you will -- and those that you perform in tandem with the task itself, particularly afterward, to help your muscles recover and reduce the occurrence of soreness. In both cases, it's generally best to hold each stretch for about 30 seconds, sometimes a bit longer if the muscle is particularly tight, all the while breathing smoothly and concentrating on relaxing the targeted muscle group. In a few cases, however, the aim of the position is also to help strengthen certain muscles, in which case you want to concentrate on contracting that muscle, feeling it squeeze as this helps to provide strength and stability to a given joint or area.



The following are two groupings of gardening-specific stretches and strengtheners; the first set is to help build your base, which means you can perform the stretches either prior to gardening or on a non-gardening day. The second group is for helping the muscles recover after a gardening or yard work session, so it's best to perform them soon after you finish cleaning up.

Not sure what these stretches look like? Members can click on the name of each stretch and pull up a clear, detailed photo (and, for those with a "V" next to the name, a video clip).









Base-building Stretches and Strengtheners for Gardening:

	Warrior 2 (V)	Strengthens the thigh, stretches the groin, and gives stability and protection to the knee and hip.
	Eagle	Promotes flexibility to the shoulders, ankle and hip, stretches and alleviates tension in the neck and upper body, strengthens the core, thigh, and inner thigh muscles, helps to improve balance.
	Dancer	Opens up the whole front of the body after long periods of being "hunched" or bent over. Instantly stretches and relieves tight thighs and a stiff low back and chest.
	"Chair" or Kneeling Half Moon	Strengthens the muscles along the waist and low back, elongates the spine, alleviates the constant pressure caused by forward/back positions.
	Opposite Arm/Leg Reach	Strengthens the muscles along the entire spinal column: the neck, shoulders, upper back and low back, and glutes, particularly when performed in a proper, neutral alignment.

**As always, be sure to seek approval from your doctor to engage in these and other exercises/stretchers, and avoid any position or movement that causes pain or discomfort.*

	Elbow Plank	Strengthens the shoulders and core muscles to give support to the low back, especially when performed with proper form: neutral spine alignment, and "pulling" the belly button "up" towards the spine.
	Lunge Twist (V)	Stretches and relieves the low back muscles, partly due to putting the back into a position other than a forward/back orientation; strengthens the back of the shoulder.

Post-Gardening Recovery:

	Cat Stretch, Part 1 and Part 2	Soothes the back after long periods of being bent over; stimulates blood flow to the spine and abdominal muscles, deepens the breath.
	Elbow Cobra (V)	A gentle stretch for a tight low back; also useful after long periods of sitting at a desk or driving a car.
	Kneeling Hip Flexor Lunge (V)	An extremely effective stretch for the whole front of the thigh and the low back.
	Wide Forward Bend with Twist	The stretch that is so effective in immediately stretching tight, tired hamstrings and a stiff low back, it often elicits "ahhhhs" of relief upon getting into it.
	Triangle (V)	Effectively stretches the hamstrings, inner thigh muscles, mid back, low back, waist, and chest. Good for releasing tension after long periods of "slouching" or being "crunched down."
	Standing Chest Stretch (V)	Immediately stretches tight chest and shoulder muscles, and can actually help improve the depth and quality of the breath.
	Standing "Bound" Neck Stretch	A simple, easy-to-perform, yet amazingly effective way to relieve neck tension, and to improve flexibility in the muscles of the neck.
	Seated Hip/Glute Stretch (V)	There will never be another like it: Instantly (and conveniently) stretches and releases tightness in the hips and glutes.

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