

# How to Prevent BACK PAIN from GARDENING

Gardening for many people is just a chore that has to be done, and for others their main leisure activity. In both cases it is important to prepare your joints and muscles prior to descending on your garden in the spring.

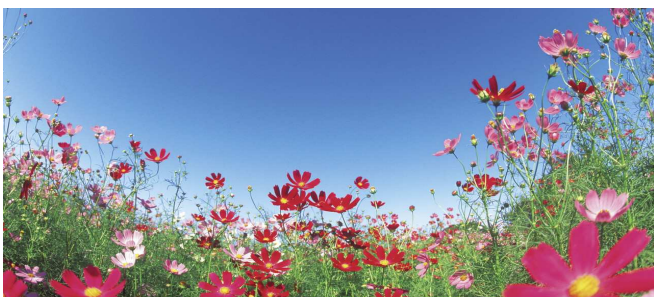
The reason people get backaches, when they undertake what appears to be a relatively restful activity such as gardening, is that the actions required are quite different from those carried out in the rest of the year.

Dr Gemma Bailey advises that the main cause of back pain when gardening is prolonged stretching and overuse of the ligaments and joints in the spine. Digging, prolonged stooping and bending over whilst planting, place considerable stress on the ligaments and joints in the lower lumbar spine and cause them to become inflamed and tender. This in turn triggers a protective muscle spasm which gives rise to the deeper, duller, achy type of pain that occurs over the following few days.

## Injury Prevention

There are many ways to help prevent injuries. Dr Bailey believes that the way you bend and move determines how much strain is put on the spine and by using certain muscles to protect your back you can reduce the likelihood of developing pain.

She believes it to be very important to warm up before any strenuous activity is started. The simplest form of warming up is walking. This should be followed by some flexibility exercises. Muscle exercises should be geared not so much to increasing the muscle strength but rather to improving the muscle's ability to keep going longer i.e. stamina.



## Flexibility

Fitzwilliam Health Clinic advises that the flexibility exercises should be done regularly once a day preferably in the morning and also before and after gardening.

1. Lie down on your back, bend your right leg and pull the knee up to the chest keeping the other leg straight. Repeat on the left leg, and then pull both knees up together. Repeat this exercise 2 or 3 times.
2. Kneel on the floor on all fours, relax the back and let the spine go hollow, then reverse the curve in the spine by arching the back. Repeat this 2 or 3 times.
3. Stretching the front of the thigh: Standing up, support yourself with one hand against the wall and take hold of the right ankle with your right hand, bend your knee up pulling the heel towards your buttock until you feel a stretching sensation on the front of the thigh. Hold for 15 seconds and repeat this three times on each leg. If you feel any discomfort in your back stop the exercise.
4. Stretching of the inside of the thigh: sitting cross legged, gently push down on your knees until you can feel the stretch. Repeat as above.

Dr Bailey advises these exercises will gently stretch and improve the flexibility in the muscles that affect the spine. By doing them regularly you will keep supple so that during the bending and crouching activities you'll be less likely to injure yourself.

## Muscle Exercises

1. Tensing the deep stomach muscles is the most effective way of supporting your back. Just try to hollow our stomach without taking a breath in. The aim is to tense the stomach muscles when you initiate a movement or when you have to stand in any prolonged awkward position, and to make it second nature. Practise this exercise regularly throughout the day in bouts of 5 repetitions holding the tension for 5-10 seconds, and then gradually increase the length of time you hold the tension.

2. To strengthen your back: Lie down with arms outstretched, raise one leg a few inches off the floor keeping the knee straight, whilst raising the opposite arm straight a few inches off the floor. Hold in this position for 5 seconds. Repeat this 5 times in succession 3 times (3 sets) to begin with and then increase the number of repetitions to your ability as you improve.

3. To exercise your buttock muscles: Stand up with your feet a few inches apart. Tense the buttocks together tightly and hold the muscles tensed for 5 seconds. Repeat this 5 times in succession, 5 times a day.

4. To strengthen your thighs: Rest your back against the wall and move your feet out 12" away from the wall. Squat down slowly to the level that your knees are bent to 45 degrees and hold this position for the count of 10. Repeat this until you feel the muscles tire.

These four muscle exercises can be done easily by most people, and will increase your stamina in the muscles of the abdomen, back, buttock and thigh.

NOTE: It takes between 2 and 3 months to build up muscle stamina, so be prepared.

## Chiropractic Gardening Tips

1. Kneel on one leg rather than bending down repeatedly from the hips.

2. Try and keep your back hollow when digging, with the legs well spaced apart. Use your legs rather than the back.

3. Try and vary the tasks of the day into short bursts of different activities rather than slogging away all day at one thing.

3. When mowing lawns with the hover mower try to resist the temptation to swing the mower from side to side in an arc. Instead mow forwards and backwards as you would with a conventional cylinder mower.

5. If you suffer from knee problems and tend to stoop rather than kneel, then use a cushion to kneel on or a gardening stool to sit on, try keeping the back as hollow as possible.

6. Keep yourself warm and covered, i.e. keep shirts tucked in; this prevents the muscles from becoming chilled.

7. If you ache the next day, rest, and seek the advice of a Chiropractor who will advise you whether you should apply heat, or ice packs to the area, or if you require further treatment.

If any of these exercises cause you pain, contact a Chiropractor for further advice and treatment. Do not leave it to go away on its own, the earlier the treatment is carried out the better.

You should exercise and keep fit so that you can enjoy your gardening and other leisure activities, rather than using your gardening as an exercise to keep fit. Good luck!



Dr Gemma Bailey D.C, Bsc (Hons) Chiro,  
19 Fitzwilliam Square South, Dublin 2  
Phone: 01 6618949

[info@fitzwilliamhealth.ie](mailto:info@fitzwilliamhealth.ie)

[www.fitzwilliamhealth.ie](http://www.fitzwilliamhealth.ie)

