

Gardening benefits more than your taste buds

Clare Spires never thought she'd be a frequent gardener.

But now, the exercise physiologist at OSF HealthCare delights in overseeing a community garden at OSF in Pontiac, Illinois. And she's letting anyone who will listen know that the benefits of gardening go beyond nutritious food.

"It's really going to help with flexibility, endurance and balance," Spires says. "There's a lot of up and down, being on your knees and bending over. If you're somebody who struggles in those areas, this is going to be a good spot to start."

Think of it as doing a lot of squats in an hour as you plant seeds and pull weeds. Your flexibility can also be challenged (for the good) if you need to get to an "odd spot" to reach that plant. All this adds up to a decreased risk for things like heart disease and high blood pressure.

The *mental* benefits of gardening match the physical benefits. It's motivation to get up in the morning. You're soaking up the sun, interacting with others and have a sense of accomplishment.

Like any other exercise, there are safety tips to keep in mind when gardening.

- Beat the heat by wearing sunscreen, drinking plenty of water, dressing appropriately (lightweight, light-colored and loose-fitting clothing) and taking breaks.
- Know how to use your tools and have a plan if you're injured. Have a first aid kit and phone nearby. Try to garden with a friend. Or if not, let someone know your plans.
- Exercise through gardening can be fun, but don't push through pain, overexert yourself or stay in one position for too long.

"Know your limits. What works for you and what doesn't," Spires says. "You can use the rate of perceived exertion [a scale that allows you to measure how much effort an activity takes]. A one level may not be too hard, or you may be totally maxed out at a 10. Try to stay in that four to six range. For example, this is an appropriate weight for me to carry."

Bend at your knees, not your back. Use your legs to support yourself as you move up and down. And don't twist your body into unnatural positions. Remember, you won't reap a full crop in one day. Take your time and enjoy things.

Read more about how to keep your body in top shape on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). OSF also has [recipes](#) that can make use of your harvested fruits and vegetables.