

*Adapted from an article by Patrick Langston, OTTAWA CITIZEN 05.08.2013*

After digging, weeding, and planting, many of us experience sore wrists, stiff backs, and aching knees. Ergonomic garden tools, designed to work with the body's natural mechanics, are said to reduce those aches and pains. A hand cultivator, for example, might be angled to work with your wrist and your shoulder relaxed. A shovel could have a round handle so you can use your gripping hand in various positions. But do these tools perform? That all depends, according to Steven Smith, a Canadian certified professional ergonomist with the Toronto-based ergonomics consulting firm Human Factors North.

“Good tool design promotes a neutral or straight posture, reduced use of force or excessive reaching,” he explains. So something like a long-handled weeder, which allows you to lift a weed, roots and all, out of the soil without bending over, is a good thing. A tool may have a cushioned grip indented to fit your fingers but everyone's hands are different. Make sure the item fits comfortably in your hand and allows you to work with wrist, back and other parts of your body in a straight or relaxed “neutral” position. If you're buying pruners or other clipping tools, choose a product that you think will make cutting easier. If it doesn't perform as expected, take it back.

Ergonomically designed or not, use your tools smartly. When crouched, reduce strain by keeping your elbows close to your body instead of reaching far forward. Use knee pads or a kneeler, available in gardening or building materials stores. The simplest thing is to incorporate rest and variety when gardening so no one part of your body gets overworked. Garden with your head, not just your body.