

## Oh My Raking Back and Mulching Muscles

By Gretchen Stark, Master Gardener Intern and Marsha Mann, Certified Personal Trainer

Autumn can be the most physically demanding season for the gardener. Garden cleanup activities, which include raking, cutting back plants and flowers, general garden maintenance, and applying mulch to the garden and yard, require physical and muscular stamina. The repetitive nature of these activities creates stress and sets the stage for future injuries to the back, knees, elbows, neck and hips. A few preventative strengthening and stretching exercises, along with a few tips on recovering from muscle aches and pains, can go a long way toward a pain-free gardening experience.

- 1. Dress for the activity.** This tip seems obvious, but besides paying attention to attire, you should think about what would help keep muscles safe. Strong boots provide stability and support for feet and ankles, which are connected to the leg bones, which are connected to the hip bones, which are connected to the back and so on and so on. Kneeling on a hard surface is particularly hard on knees, so using wearable knee pads or a kneeling pad is essential. If gardening elbow is an issue there are elbow supports available for the lifting and hauling activities. Knee braces are also available to help provide support and to provide a reminder to watch out for twisting and turning. Ear plugs preserve the ears from the roar when you use a leaf-blower or lawn mower and reduce the other sounds that may happen in the neighborhood.
- 2. Posture is important.** A gardener cannot avoid bending over or bending forward. However, getting as close as possible to that plant or pile of leaves/mulch will save the stress and strain on the shoulders, neck, and lower back. Another tip is to bend at the hip area first instead of rounding the shoulders down. Remember to keep those knees unlocked to prevent over-stretching the muscles leading to the lower back.
- 3. Drink water.** In the cooler seasons it is often difficult to remember to drink plenty of water. Water keeps the muscles working well. The AARP web site, [www.AARP.org](http://www.AARP.org), suggests that as people age the body is less able to regulate temperature. Age also affects the ability to stay hydrated. The web site gives some general rules about staying hydrated: start the day with 1-2 cups of water, and about 30 minutes before exercising drink 1-2 cups of water. For each 15 minutes of exercise, plan on drinking 1/2 cup to 1 cup of water.
- 4. Take breaks and change positions.** Changing positions gives relief to muscles stressed by repetitive motions. Putting your garden clippings or leaves in smaller containers when bagging forces a gardener to get up more often and change positions. Keep a camera nearby and take a "Photo Op" break to capture some of the beauty in the garden. Besides giving our muscles a break, taking the time to look around the gardens reminds us why we take such pleasure in gardening.
- 5. Use tools to save muscles.** There are ergonomic rakes, trowels, pruners, and other tools available now that will help reduce muscle fatigue and injury. Use the wheelbarrow for hauling heavy loads. Remember also that a pen and a checkbook, or a credit card, are valuable tools you can use to hire someone to do the hard physical work, saving you both time and potential muscle injury.
- 6. Know when medical intervention is necessary.** Learn to recognize the difference between sore muscles and a joint or tendon injury or arthritis pain. All of them require separate treatment. Most muscles soreness can be

treated with home remedies: pain relievers, ice and heat, and rest. However, joint pain, torn muscles, and swelling are often symptoms of more serious injuries and should be treated by medical staff. The American Heart Association, [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org), lists the symptoms of both heart attacks and strokes. The heart attack warning signs are: chest discomfort, discomfort in other areas of the upper body, shortness of breath and other signs like nausea, lightheadedness or breaking out in a cold sweat. If those symptoms should occur, call 911 immediately.

7. **Ice is nice; heat is neat.** In general, ice applied to a sore muscle reduces swelling and heat improves circulation. Consult with your physician to determine which is best for you, but many people use ice for the first few hours and follow that with heat.

8. **Stretch and strengthen.** Gardening activities often find gardeners hunched over plants or leaves, or reaching and pulling. These repetitive activities use large muscle groups in the back, the shoulder, neck and the back of the legs. A simple strengthening and stretching program can bring big dividends to those mulching muscles and make the gardening experience more enjoyable.

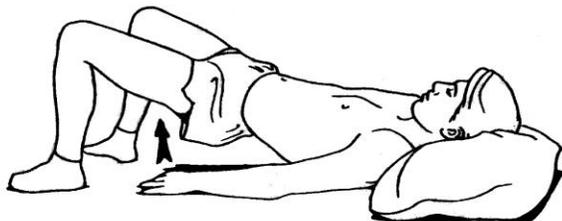
**Marsha Mann, certified personal trainer and post-rehab specialist with Destination Fitness, recommends the following stretches and exercises to combat the stress on the “gardening muscles.” Marsha has been a certified trainer for over 20 years and is particularly skilled at working with clients recovering from injuries.**

1. Bridges: lie on your back on the floor. Bend your knees, keeping your feet on floor. Keep your feet & legs together. Tighten your tush & push your hips to the ceiling 15 times.
2. Back extensions: lie on your stomach on the floor. Extend your right arm straight out above your head. Slowly lift your right arm & left leg 2 inches off the floor, keeping your elbow & knee "locked". Hold 1-2 seconds & repeat 15 times. Repeat with left arm & right leg.\*  
*\*This exercise can also be done standing up against a wall/door.*
3. Chest & arm stretch: Stand in a doorway. Extend your arms to form a "Y". Then lean forward until you feel a stretch in your upper chest & arms. Hold 30 seconds.
4. Quadriceps & hip flexor stretch: Stand near a wall/door. Grab your right ankle with your right hand (use a towel or stretching rope if needed). Stand tall pulling the right knee slightly behind your hipline. Hold 30 seconds & repeat with left leg.
5. Triceps & back stretch. Stand & put your right hand on the back of your neck. Using your left hand, grasp the right elbow & gently pull the right elbow back until a stretch is felt in the back of the arm toward the armpit. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat with left arm.

*Marsha Mann is available to give speeches/seminars to Garden Clubs. She will be starting an exercise class for gardeners at Destination Fitness beginning in February 2010. Contact her at **703-506-9577** for details.*

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**TRUNK STABILITY - 9**  
Bridging



Slowly raise buttocks from floor, keeping stomach tight.  
Hold 1-2 seconds.  
Repeat 15 times. Do 1 sessions per day.

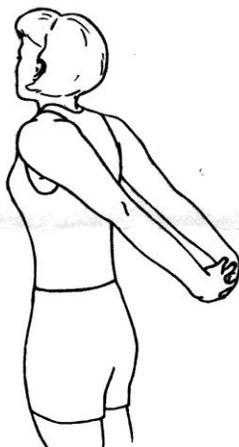
**BACK - 5**  
Prone Opposite Arm and Leg Lift



Keeping knee locked, raise leg and opposite arm 8-10 inches from floor. Hold 1-2 seconds.  
Repeat 15 times each side. Do 1 sessions per day.

**ARMS - 1 Biceps**

With arms straight and fingers interlaced, raise arms until stretch is felt. Hold 30 seconds.



Repeat 1 times.  
Do 1 sessions per day.

**ARMS - 8 Triceps**

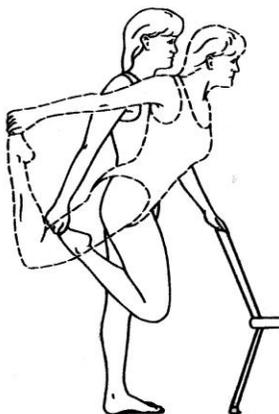
Pull elbow behind head until stretch is felt. Repeat with other elbow. Hold 30 seconds.



Repeat 1 times.  
Do 1 sessions per day.

**UPPER LEG - 6 Quadriceps**

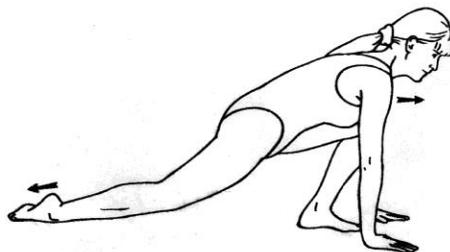
From starting position, raise leg until stretch is felt. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat with other leg.



Repeat 1 times.  
Do 1 sessions per day.

**HIP OBLIQUE - 11 Flexors**

From position shown, slide foot back and move trunk forward until stretch is felt. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat with other foot.



Repeat 1 times. Do 1 sessions per day.