

Why and how to keep gardening as years add up: The full interviews

Thoughts from long-time gardeners

Interviews conducted in April-May 2013

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Questions we asked:

(Why) What keeps you gardening? Why bother?

(How) How do you keep at it when you can't do all the same things you once did? What helps you, what would you recommend? What do you do to keep on coming out and gardening?

Marge Alpern

93

(Why)

There's a feeling that even if things are tough and I can't do anything else, I can spend just a little bit of money and put these plants in the ground. By god I can do that and they grow.

(How)

If it doesn't grow well just get rid of it. Or forget about it.

I used to know the names for all the plants, and now I think it doesn't really matter.

Grow something indoors. Pots are so simple.

Exercise. I am a yogi. I've done yoga every morning for over 40 years.

I use my cane.

Audrey Bardy

70+

(Why)

You have to! It's like having a child, isn't it... you can't just abandon it!

And you don't want it to all look awful out in your yard. It needs to look nice enough that you can enjoy it.

(How)

Find someone to help you decide how to simplify it. Make a plan and do a little as you can.

Take out some beds and turn them back to lawn.

Use more landscape plants, not so many garden things.
Pick smaller things, that don't get so big. If they do get big, wide is okay, I can reach to prune things that are wide but I can't reach what's too tall.

Burdette Chapman

87

(Why)

Every day I'm waiting to get out there. I watch the sun come up. And if it's raining I go out anyway. I always appreciate every day.

Gardening is what I'm getting up for in the morning. Just going out there, seeing things come up, it's wonderful. To see things grow, even if they're WEEDS!

If a seed comes up, you're hooked. You HAVE to keep doing. You know you'll never get done but that's all right.

(How)

Do it every day. I can't wait for winter to end but I do need all the seasons. I use winter to rest a bit, to do other things and to plan, to order plants, and start things from seed very early.

I do stretches on the floor every morning. This thing I got from the chiropractor. You pull your stomach muscles in and your legs up. It's not hard. It doesn't take long. I have a mat I lie on.

(Some sources for basic exercise regimen:)

<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/MP696>

<http://mda.org/publications/everyday-life-als/chapter-9/stretching-exercises#back>

I'm good in the morning. I come in for lunch then might stay out until 3. I rest when I come in for lunch.

My 3 prong rake thing is my right hand. And I love my forks. I have two.

Six years ago my knees went, and I had them done two years apart. Now there are some things I don't do because I want to be careful no to fall on them. Skating...

I've started sitting on a chair while I work. And using the longer handled tools. I sit on a chair or a bucket or a milk crate. Eventually I sit right on the ground (as when we worked on the path down the hill).

I also love my golf cart and wagon. And my wheelbarrow. I get behind it and it kind of runs by itself down the hill.

Have a compost on site close by; hidden but right there.

Place barrels around the property so it's easier to get water when you need it. Put mineral oil in the barrel so mosquitoes can't breed there.

Put big stones down, stepping stones to get in and out of the garden where you most often are

Don't insist on what won't work. I put a garden where the septic was but it didn't work. So that garden's gone.

I know I should also get rid of plants that don't work but I can hardly ever do that.

Every seedling, I have to find it a home. My delphiniums have this problem so they're getting to be more and more work, and might even die. I have to put stuff on them because of fungus problems. So I did this. I called someone and said, "Look I have these delphiniums and they have mold problems but if you want them all you have to do is come dig them." But some were left and you know what I did, I dug them all up and moved them to another bed. I'm putting stuff on them. Maybe they'll be okay!

Catherine Connelly

70+ (author of *The Nature of Poetry: Poems for the Seasons*, www.xlibris.com)

(Why)

How to cut back when age catches up

How to keep gardening when the spirit is eager but the body is not

'Adapt' we say to our body but 'how' queries our heart

When the heart shouts Go but the body says No.

(How)

"I'll write down some notes and send them to you!"

Phase I The Basics

Raised beds

Rethinking beds by sodding, ground cover or other creative ways

Acquiring lighter tools and hand tools with 3 foot handles

Containers: Thinking of them as part of the garden design

Armchair weeding and watering

Choosing drought resistant plants alternatives to water guzzlers.

Phase II Inventory gardening skills/needs at age 70 plus

Phase III Possible changes that occur from inventory

If you're comfortable clopping shrubs then maybe use interesting small shrubs for color instead of labor intensive annuals or perennials.: No/Less planting flats, watering, fertilizing, dividing, etc.

Use non-plant material for color and interest: Statuary, garden flags 2' x 3', rocks, whimsical yard art, even attractive old birdbaths or bird feeders that you give yourself permission not to fill. String some white floating lights or any color you like on a tree or shrub for evening magic. Use flat slabs of rock of whatever color you want and build paths in your beds. Maybe replace some annuals with interesting hostas.

Use more mulch and ground cover, too.

Phase IV Making sure we can garden tomorrow

A practical checklist we all know by heart but many times don't follow:

Ask for help

Garden with cell phone nearby

Have water bottle nearby but most importantly DRINK OFTEN

Place a chair in the shade to rest. Take a break before you need it

Keep sunscreen/hat with your tools

Think about hiring someone to help if your budget allows it

As the changes take place and the hard work is lessened make sure you have a comfortable perch to gaze on the beauty that you have created.

If all else fails and you are ready to downsize WINK WINK WINK:

Buy your new place near a nature center or park.

Pick your new place where the landscaping is pleasant and maintained for you.

Make sure you relocate where you have room outside for pots of your favorite plants.

A nice view of the grounds will help your spirit across the changes.

Germaine Cortes

70+

(Why)

I HAVE to have a garden. I love my garden. I eat breakfast out here. Sometimes my daughter Lily is here and we come out together.

(To make it possible:)

Make it more accessible. More paths. Not so secure on your feet! I am working on that now.

I stick with what grows well in Michigan. Let go of the fancy stuff.

You want to be able to do things yourself, you don't want other people doing things in YOUR garden! I do everything myself except now and then Lily will come out here. Or like you showing me how to prune this willow. And good tools like this long clipper, wow, it's great.

My garden was on the garden tour last year.

Burt Crawford

75; retired owner of Garden Path specialty garden center (Japanese maples, conifers)

(Why)

You know, I was born and raised right in the city and we were the only one of the row houses with any color. And that was just some 4 o'clocks that reseeded themselves in front of the coal bin. But it was the only color on the block and I guarded that from the other kids, "Hey, you leave that alone."

Then in 3rd grade I had the chance to go to Belle Isle to the conservatory there. They'd forced all the daffodils. I can still see it now. That warm, humid place with all that color! It never left me.

(How)

Now we have a big gazebo we built, and a pergola. They're big rooms and we stay out there most of the summer. We started out with daylilies-- they're so easy to take care of and you never run out. Although now I have to fence out the deer!

I think that basically, Roundup is the key. To just kill all the bad stuff to start with. Plus I'm not in such a rush any more. If I start out with a half dozen daylilies, work the soil up for those and also behind it, I can split the first bunch and buy some more to plant the next year.

Also I put a lot of Preen down in the spring. That's really important to not have any weeds to deal with.

To grow stuff that you have to do a lot of spraying, why bother? We grew a vegetable garden for about 5 years but then the deer came, and the bugs came, and then all the vegetables come at once and you end up giving most of it away.... So we said these daylilies are great in June and July but let's put perennials in that vegetable garden so we have something after the daylilies.

When we plant there, wild stuff comes up between the perennials and I can let that be for a year or so. I'm not in a rush. When I need the room then I take out that other stuff.

Ah, you know 3 steps high on a ladder, that's all I go anymore. Your balance all goes to hell when you get older! All the gray matter you have left rolls to one side and you tip over. Maybe I like gardening because I'm on the ground. I can fall over but not far.

Phyllis Dennison

87

(Why)

On a nice day I like to go outside and putter. You dig the dirt and keep them watered. I like the hibiscus, it's red, the flowers are so pretty. And it comes up every year. I don't think it will but it does. And I have those four hydrangeas out there, my daughter gave me those.

I remember my mother had a pretty good garden. She'd raise carrots and green beans and we'd put them up. The there was the big garden that had wheat and things like that.

(How)

It's getting more difficult. The neighbors must think I'm drunk I wobble so much, I'm unsteady now. I move slower. And if some little thing throws me off it's like my brain goes in a circle and I can't get back on track.

Sometimes I have to just accept things, like when my son-in-law helps me, he's just great he wants to do everything. But he has this powerful trimmer, edger and he trims the heck out of everything. He cut a gully along my garage and now the water gets in there. And the way he clips the bushes is not the way I like my bushes. I like to trim shrubs like a bush not a shape. But if you can't do it yourself just shut up and let it go. Yes I'm still using that old wheelbarrow I inherited 30 years ago.

Betty Grady

80+

I love flowers, all kinds of flowers. I think there should be flowers in the house. I cut some every day. We dry some. We give them to people. We make pictures of them and send them.

(How)

We take things out that take too much work. Just take them out. Grow fewer kinds of things, but things that you like to look at and that don't get out of control or look shaggy. We use the "Ordie" rule. That is, "Grow well, or die!"

Good tools, sharp tools.

Find someone to help you. Do what you like to do and can do. Do something every day. Use things from your garden. Eat them, put them in vases and so on. If you don't use things you will stop going out and enjoying it.

Frank Harney

93

(Why)

When you grow up on a farm, it's a way of life. You can take the boy off the farm but you can't take the farm out of the boy.

If I can't be out I feel pent up. I can't wait for winter to end to go out and see green. I wouldn't know what to do to fill the time if I don't go out. (About going South? "Never getting close to stay. OK, let's go home! I've got to have seasons. You don't have to shovel sunshine but I have to have a change of seasons.")

I'm not into electronics,

Science has passed me by.

I'm a pen and paper, hammer and nail
pick and shovel kind of guy.

If people don't have the notion to go out, I wish we could give them a shot or a pill!
I'm like a caged lion. I have to get out there. (Had a hip replacement December 11, until then I was fine. Now I can't bend, squat or kneel and all the doctor will say is "There's a lot going on in that hip" and won't even stay with me long enough to finish telling me how to do some exercises!)

When people ask, "How you doing, Frank?" I say, "I'm on the right side of the lawn!"
(How)

Long handled tools. I have a picker sticker, and a long handled trowel.

Raised beds. Any way to raise the plants to me.

I have my garden trays, 8" x 8" x 24", I use those as raised beds, up on railings. I fill them with bagged soil made with peat. But make sure you get a good kind or it's like road patch, you have to blend it with something good first. I know I did it. When the deal is for something you don't need, and I did NOT need road patch! -- then it's no deal!

Keep trying new things. Don't use the same old same old. I tried something with peas and carrots around my bird feeder planter and it didn't work, last year. I was using old seed. I have new seed this year!

Mildred Jackson

"Way over 70!"

(Why)

I just love flowers. To look out here it just makes my heart beat faster. I have flowers from March right to fall.

(How)

Don't feel bad telling people how you want things done.

Is it harder or different having someone to garden for me and do the things I don't want to do any more? No, it's easier and it's fun.

Ginger Reichenbach

70+

I've always loved to be out here and always been out here all day. Every day.

(How)

Don't stop. Don't ever stop.

If you are offered help, take it and have them do things you can't.

Remember what my father told me, if you have maybe two or more grandsons or young men who offer to help. "If you have one boy you have one boy. If you have two boys you have half a boy. If you have three boys, you have no boy."

Lois Robbins

80+ (the author of *Lawn Wars: The Struggle for a New Lawn Ethic*, Iuniverse, Bloomington, IN, 2009)

(Why)

(How)

Less is good. Figure out a way to do less.

I find if I am careful about weeding, I can weed the high visibility areas such as the front edge of a bed -- I usually only weed the front edge from the edge to 2' in -- and let the rest go.

Having the Backyard Wildlife Habitat sign posted in the front explains a lot. The people understand and accept a little more difference.

Work in the mornings before the day gets hot
Sit.

Find shade. Make shade! I want a wheelbarrow or cart where you can insert a market umbrella and then work in its shade. I sent the idea to Gardeners' Supply but no go, so far.

Garden in raised beds. You can sit to work easily. Great for if you're wheelchair-bound. Native plants do give a more natural look and don't require so much careful attending. Use good tools.

Container gardening. It's how I do all my vegetable gardening now, - whiskey barrels and big pots on my deck; 2 window boxes of basil.

Respect your limitations. Don't be embarrassed to say, "I don't dig any more." I started not digging years ago making new beds with newspaper and mulch on the lawn. The greatest idea ever.

Virginia Smith

95

(Why)

Because we love it.

Because we wake up in the morning and realize, "Well. Looks like I get another day."

Because I enjoy watching things grow. I like to plant small trees so much, it's fun seeing them grow.

(How)

Lower your standards. Don't be such a perfectionist. There are places where what we cultivate are weeds, and vice versa. Dandelions are very pretty. I'm not going to worry about that creeping buttercup. I realized I've been fighting that weed for something like 50 years and recently I realized it's very pretty.

My son had a roof garden in San Francisco. On the 4th floor. He had jade plants, etc. He wanted some color with annuals. We went out for him, trying to find California poppies, we went to nurseries all over because I think they're beautiful. Couldn't find them. IT was as if you were going to a nursery and asking to buy dandelions. California poppies even become a weed in San Francisco.

I hate it when they kill the violets in my lawn with the stuff they put on. I love them... the flower, the leaf. They're very pretty.

So maybe you take your glasses off once in a while!

Enjoy what you've got. Don't be too worried about it.

My 4-pronged cane works well even in the garden. Regular canes don't, they sink in. And I use my old garden cart -- I bought that with green stamps! -- I can hold onto the handle for balance. I put all my stuff in it and also use it for support.

Some people might not feel secure. So don't do what doesn't feel secure. Just don't do it.

We shouldn't bend over as we get older, not without support. We get dizzy. So support yourself on a cane, lean out from there. I carry my cane like a security blanket. It's especially useful if you have to stand and wait.

You never know how nice people are, until you start to use a cane. Everyone does everything for you. Gas -- even if you didn't want to you get help there! So you have to get over not wanting to have people help you.

The tool I use most is my hand clipper. Get a good one, that's right for you.

Plant more shrubs and trees. Things get bigger and you question sometimes do you have a place for a certain perennial? I depend on pots, put everything like that in pots now. I use all plastic, no ceramic -- too heavy. I can enjoy pots more than in the gardens, I only put in what I really love. Like Persian shield, I must have it. Popcorn plant, so wonderful it even smells like popcorn.

Sprinkler system is only around the flower garden area.
Haven't had good luck with drip irrigation for pots.

Get rid of what doesn't grow well. You don't even have to do the throwing out. It's just survival of the fittest. I don't want to be a nurse.

Find help. My son comes by once a week and I keep a to do list, even things like changing a light bulb, because I don't get on ladders.

Accept that help won't do things just like you would. I said, "I think I need to cut this hedge back" and my son said, "I'll bring the chain saw. But I didn't want him to just cut it all down! So I cut it before he got here. I told him, never mind it doesn't need it. Yes. I lopped all those branches. But I almost did myself in.

The mail lady knows because I've told her, that I only ever stay out for about 2 hours anymore. I know my limits. Once, when she went by, we talked, she asked and I said I'd been out for about an hour. She said it would be about an hour before she circled back past my house and if she saw me out then she'd remind me to go in. When I heard the mail truck coming back I went and hid in the garage. I wasn't done yet but I didn't want her to worry about me!

I love to prune. Have, all my life. Can't stand crossing branches. Want to see the outline of the plant. I tell people to have no fear. anything you cut off is usually going to come back. If it doesn't, don't get up tight. Say, "I really like it that way"!

If you ever don't know what to do, get a cotoneaster. You can prune it every week, and there it is going wild again.

Don't leave stubs, for aesthetics and for the health of the plant. Try to make it invisible, whatever you cut. If you can see where someone cut it, it wasn't done right. My grandmother, who was a gardener, told me that.

Wil Strickland

60+

(How)

Watch what does well. Plant a lot of that and let the plants fight it out. I call it choosing your weeds.

Use containers for color.

Ward Varns, Lorraine Varns

79 & 77

Ward is 79 and I am 77 - we aren't as frisky as we were 40 years ago!

Our lot is 75 x 210 and we need to spend more than an hour a day the first month of summer and an hour a day after that. It takes me 1 hour and 10 minutes to cut the grass alone – we have 2 mowers so we can do it in about 40 minutes but we keep a bottle of water on the patio table and we sit down every 20 minutes or so and take a 10 minute break and we try to make sure that we take the full 10 minutes.

We usually spread only one cart of mulch at a time. Working one hour a day Monday thru Friday does not get to be a chore – in fact it is rewarding – of course this is only for people who like gardening. It is also a great way to get enough exercise.

We also volunteer at our church and spread mulch around all of the trees. We limit the work to one hour at a time.

We work better in the morning or late afternoon to avoid the heat of the day.

Getting up and down a kneeler is not as easy as it used to be but the kind that has sides with a handle makes it so much easier to get up and down. Raised beds require less kneeling.

Once everything is done we just need to keep up with the weeds the rest of the summer. When we divide our work we have time to do other things – we found out that we don't sit around in retirement but the things we do are usually the things we chose to do.

As much as we love gardening when October and November get here we are ready for a break from it!

P.S. from Macunovich, Nikkila & Chapman

Interesting: Connelly, Varns, Robbins and perhaps others in this line-up volunteer with garden groups. None of them mentioned that in our interviews*; we wonder if they made no comment because volunteering is such a basic part of their lives that they no longer even consider all its impact. What we see is that when people of different ages and abilities garden together, everyone in the group can honestly claim a beautiful or productive garden as their own. Yet each did only the work they could manage. Those who can dig, do, while those who have the savvy to deal with pests or the patience to prune, do that instead. All of the tasks are vital and come together. So we recommend to every older gardener: Volunteer in a garden!

*We asked Robbins a leading question to test that water. She replied, "Join a group so others do the work you can't do? If that was a reason to do what I did, I did it ass backward. I started a native landscape group because I saw a grant was available and I knew there were people in the area interested in natives. I went to them and said 'Look I

will write this grant if you will be a team to execute it.' I kind of thought writing the grant would be my contribution but I spend more time on that native garden than in my own yard now!"