



Practical advice for senior gardeners

BY KATHY FRITTS

Admit it. Even the heartiest, healthiest, hardest-working gardener must eventually yield to diminishing energy and declining physical abilities.

"At 66, I don't feel particularly senior," says Bob Reynolds, Jackson County Master Gardener coordinator. "My idea of senior seems to be changing with each birthday. I suspect that's partly self-delusion."

Thomas Jefferson had no such delusions: "Though an old man, I am but a young gardener."

A new book, "The Illustrated Practical Guide to Gardening for Seniors," by Portland gardener Patty Cassidy, provides a step-by-step guide to remaining a "young gardener."

Cassidy, who has experience gardening with Alzheimer's disease patients and assisted-living residents, helped develop the Portland Memory Garden for Alzheimer's patients and is a Master Gardener and board member of the American Horticultural

Therapy Association. Her book contains more than 900 color illustrations and focuses strictly on practical ways to stay in the garden regardless of age.

Cassidy says gardeners just have to make changes — some big and some small. She outlines some of the choices facing aging gardeners, such as staying put or sharing the family home but downsizing a large garden — choices already confronting many local gardeners.

Carolyn Trottmann, editor of the Jackson County Master Gardener newsletter, "The Garden Beet," bought property with her son and his family, so now they garden jointly on what they call "The Compound." Carol Oneal, former president of the Jackson County Master Gardener Association, cut back on gardening, sold her property and now lives on the same acreage as her daughter, where they do lots of "sharecropping."

Some senior gardeners may move into

apartments or community-living facilities, and Cassidy's book details ways they can continue gardening, such as with patio, indoor and container gardens. Cassidy, a licensed horticultural therapist, also provides advice for caregivers, landscape architects and children whose parents are transitioning to residential communities.

Aging can mean hiring muscle or adapting techniques that require less of it, says Cassidy. It's another lesson being put into practice by local gardeners.

Ellen Scannell, head of the lavender garden at the Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center in Central Point, finally hired a helper to prune the garden's 250 lavender plants. Joan Long, Master Gardener archivist and historian, used to prune her own trees but not anymore. Reynolds sings the praises of mulching over weeding, and he doesn't turn his compost anymore, just spreads it on his garden beds.

Her physical therapist says it takes longer for older joints to loosen, so Trottmann begins by walking around the garden first to warm up and enjoy the plants before starting the hard work. Gwen Evans, a Master Gardener since 1998, has become "more conscious of garden hoses and paths since I fell three times last year, and I've become more careful about putting things away." Evans' orthopedist says graveled paths are much harder on joints than mulched, so she adapted and put down mulch.

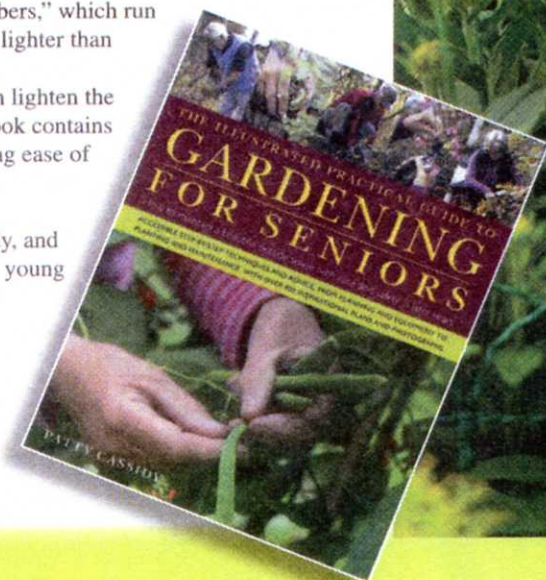
The book also contains information about a number of adaptive devices and techniques to help senior gardeners keep digging — no matter physical limitations — and includes photos of several kinds of kneelers, advice on how to garden in a walker or wheelchair and designs for safe paths, steps and ramps.

Seventy pages are devoted to ergonomic tools, including adaptations of existing ones, and less arduous gardening techniques to lighten the workload. Even younger gardeners are beginning to use these kinds of muscle-saving tools, according to Reynolds, who advises senior gardeners to work "slower and smarter" instead and looking for ways to reduce labor.

He recently bought two new pruners he likes: an aluminum pair that's half the usual weight and another with gears to lessen the effort. Evans recommends a lighter-weight wheelbarrow and sometimes uses smaller tools meant for children to ease hand strain. Scannell trims lavender bushes with battery-powered "shrubbers," which run for more than an hour and are much lighter than electric hand shears.

Choosing the right plants also can lighten the load for senior gardeners, and the book contains a focused plant directory emphasizing ease of maintenance.

It is entirely possible to carry on gardening for a lifetime, says Cassidy, and her guide can help gardeners remain young like Thomas Jefferson.



Assistive gardening devices

- Rotating compost tumbler: beats turning by hand with an aerator
- Grampa's weeder: pull dandelions without bending over
- Add-on assistive devices, such as arm-support cuffs or D-grips on long-handled tools: help arthritic hands or bad backs
- Easy-grip fork or trowel: angled to minimize strain
- Battery-powered cutting tools: less work and fewer hazards than electric or gas
- Long-handled, circle hoe or Hula-Ho weeder: efficient, upright weeding
- Two-handed, lightweight, plastic watering can: easier to carry
- Quick-connect hose attachments: for arthritic or weak fingers
- Easy-turn handles on outdoor taps: for fingers that don't bend so well

