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ASHT ISSUES STRETCHES AND TIPS TO PREVENT INJURIES THIS GARDENING SEASON

Professional Hand Therapists Stress Precaution for Gardeners

CHICAGO, IL – May 9, 2005 – As gardeners head into this season, weeds aren't the only ones in danger. A relaxing and enjoyable activity for many, gardening can turn dangerous without proper precaution as repetitive stress injuries, tendonitis and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome can stem from this pastime. Additionally, simple scrapes, blisters, and bites can turn into serious problems if not treated appropriately. Since prevention is the best approach, the American Society of Hand Therapists (ASHT) is providing warm-up exercises and injury prevention tips to help all levels of gardeners avoid serious and long-term injuries while enjoying this outdoor activity.

“The repetitive movements associated with gardening such as raking, weeding, digging and pruning put stress on the hand and wrist. Many gardeners spend hours performing these activities with improper form, which can lead to a variety of problems in the hands and entire upper extremity,” said ASHT President Donna Breger Stanton, MA, OTR/L, CHT, FAOTA. “Warming up before gardening is just as important as warming up before a vigorous workout. Gardeners need to protect themselves from long-term damage so they can continue to enjoy this activity.”

ASHT recommends following these upper extremity warm-up exercises prior to gardening:

Note: These exercises should never be painful when completing them. You should only feel a gentle stretch. Should you experience pain, please consult a hand therapist or physician.

- Fold your hands together and turn your palms away from your body as you extend your arms forward. You should feel a stretch all the way from your shoulders to your fingers. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.

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- Fold your hands together and turn your palms away from your body, but this time extend your arms overhead. You should feel the stretch in your upper torso and shoulders to hand. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Place your hand just above the back of the elbow and gently push your elbow across your chest toward the opposite shoulder. This is a stretch for the upper back and shoulder. Stretch both the right and left arms. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Raise one arm overhead. Bend the elbow. Place the opposite hand on the bent elbow and gently push the elbow back further. This is a stretch for the triceps. Stretch both the right and left arms. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Extend an arm in front of you, making sure the elbow is completely straight. With your palm down, take the opposite hand and bend in the wrist downward. Then turn the palm up, and stretch the wrist backwards. This stretches the forearm and wrist muscles. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.

“Warming up is a good way to start before gardening to prevent injuries. Poor form and bad habits during gardening can bring an early end to the gardening season. ASHT is providing gardeners with simple and helpful tips to help avoid painful injuries,” said Breger Stanton. “Following these guidelines in addition to warming up before you begin is the best way to stay healthy and enjoy the season.”

ASHT released professionally designed guidelines to prevent injury and foster healthy gardening practices:

- **Wear gloves at all times.** Bacteria and fungus live in the soil and a small irritation or cut can develop into a major hand infection. Thick, leather or suede gloves may protect your hands from thorns, cuts and scrapes.
- **Keep your hands and arms covered.** Be especially careful if you live in an area where you may disturb a snake, spider, or rodent living in your garden. You will be better protected from poison ivy, insect bites and other common skin irritants that may inhabit a garden.
- **Take a break every hour or switch to another activity.** Overuse of repetitive motions, such as digging, can cause tendonitis of the elbow or lead to carpal tunnel syndrome. Break up large tasks into short sessions, with a rest and stretch break between gardening sessions.
- **Use a tool when digging into unfamiliar or new areas.** Buried sharp objects can cause tendon lacerations or punctures. Use the correct tool for the task at hand in order to avoid accidental injury.
- **Store your tools to prevent accidents.** Learn how to use and store your tools correctly to prevent accidents, and keep sharp tools out of the reach of children at all times. Also make sure to put all tools away after use to prevent future injuries.
- **Use wide handled tools.** Use tools with padded or thicker handles to protect the smaller joints in your hands. Working with your wrist in a more neutral or straight position will help to prevent injuries in the wrist and forearm.
- **Avoid sustained/constant gripping and awkward motions.** Use both hands for heavy activities like lifting a bag of potting soil and alternate hands on more repetitive tasks like scooping dirt out of the bag into a pot. Sustained grip and repetitive motions can cause pain and lead to tendonitis.
- **Plan ahead.** Use a basket or large handled container to carry supplies to the garden. The basket should be carried with both hands, distributing the workload equally and decreasing stress in the joints of your upper body.
- **Don't sit back on your knees.** Bending your knees this far is not only a hard position for the knee joint, but it requires you to push most of your body weight up with your hands and wrists, placing increased pressure on these joints as well. Instead, use a short gardening stool or bench.

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According to Breger Stanton, another way to prevent injuries among avid gardeners is to find ways to alter their gardening routine. Simply changing a few motions while working in the yard easily can help prevent the onset of repetitive stress injuries, blisters, tendonitis or Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

The warm-up exercises and safety tips were developed by professional hand therapists who are occupational and physical therapists specializing in the treatment of the hands, arms and shoulders. These exercises and tips have been designed to supplement more commonly known gardening safety practices that concentrate only on preventing back injuries.

For more information about professional hand therapy, visit www.asht.org.

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The American Society of Hand Therapists (ASHT) is a non-profit organization with the goal to advance the specialty of hand therapy through communication, education, research and the establishment of clinical standards. ASHT's nearly 3,000 members in the United States, Canada and around the world strive to be recognized leaders in the hand therapy profession. For more information about hand therapy or to find a hand therapist in your area, visit www.asht.org.