

Tips for becoming a green thumb in your retirement years

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A meeting with a master gardener at a gardening show led Nancy McDonald to take the master gardener program through the Nova Scotia Agricultural College.

JUSTIN TANG/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Gardening is one of the most versatile retirement activities, ranging from growing a few flowers on the balcony to designing ambitious full-yard plant landscapes.

A survey by Dalhousie University researchers found 31 per cent of people who started food gardening in 2020 were between 54 and 72. Enthusiasts cite benefits including being active outdoors, fostering creativity and – particularly during the pandemic and amid rising grocery prices – having affordable and healthy homegrown food.

Gardeners throw themselves into the hobby for varying reasons and are always ready to offer tips. Here are four Canadian green thumbs offering advice for seniors on how to dig in:

Nancy McDonald, 73, Ottawa

Nancy McDonald was getting close to retirement when she encountered a master gardener at a booth at the Ottawa Home and Garden show in 2009.

That meeting inspired her to take the master gardener program through the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. She gardened and grew up on a farm so the certification, which requires participants to take courses and share their knowledge, seemed like a good retirement fit.

“I thought, ‘I’m going to join this group because it’s a way to learn and volunteer,’” Ms. McDonald says.

Today the retired nurse is busy gardening, speaking and writing about gardening.

“I have quite a few perennials, shrubs, trees; I grow salad things. I grow herbs,” says Ms. McDonald, who belongs to two horticultural societies.

She speaks to gardening and horticulture clubs about staying healthy while gardening as well as growing and consuming herbs and edible flowers. “I make jellies out of things like lilacs and peonies and nasturtiums, and I make vinegars. I’m always looking for recipes.”

Ms. McDonald also grows micro-greens in her home during the winter for a blast of nutrition and preserves produce such as rhubarb and garlic.

Tips: She cautions beginners to know their capabilities and pace themselves to avoid injury.

“If you get a load of mulch, don’t try to do it all in one weekend. If you do the same thing over and over again, it’s going to hurt,” she says. “I try to do something for 20 minutes or half an hour. Have a stretch period, a bit of water. Then maybe do something else – deadheading or weeding. Vary tasks, so you’re not putting repetitive strain on one part of the body.”

She also suggests stretching and warm-up pre-gardening exercises.

Mike McHugh, 63, Victoria

Mike McHugh was already a gardener when he and his partner retired and moved to Victoria from Toronto in 2014. He joined the Victoria Horticultural Society (VHS) soon after.

“I was concerned about how we would form roots – and the VHS has been huge in that. You get to meet like-minded people... In retirement, you can feel a bit isolated,” says Mr. McHugh, now president of the VHS.

He likes how the hobby helped him ease into retirement.

“Gardening makes you slow down,” he says. “That can take a bit of getting used to; the switch from external deadlines to managing your own time. That’s very valuable.”

Another side benefit of gardening is the enriched travel experiences. He and his partner have gone on organized garden tours around the world. During a trip to New Zealand, for instance, they found themselves searching out botanical gardens and arboretums wherever they went.

Tips: Joining a local garden club or society is a great way to get started and get good local advice, Mr. McHugh says. For instance, Victoria has several micro-climates which dictate what to grow.

Ronda Tuyp, 71, Vancouver

Ronda Tuyp was a gardener long before she retired from her nursing career, but retirement has allowed her to pursue her passion for garden design and plant propagation. Today, she manages the garden centre at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Botanic Garden that's run by the Friends of the Garden volunteer group.

Ms. Tuyp's greatest satisfaction is designing gardens – taking them from blank canvases, determining where the sun and cold spots are – and finding the right plant for the right space.

She says her greatest accomplishment was creating a garden with a terraced patio and different levels of lawn on her acre-sized property with the help of one skilled backhoe operator.

“We created a space so gorgeous. I was shocked and pleased it turned out.”

Ms. Tuyp also enjoys propagating plants – the process of reproducing plants from a single parent plant – as well as growing from seeds, cuttings and division, which involves splitting a perennial plant into two or more pieces with a spade.

“I love alpine plants that are hard to find. I like trilliums and Cypripediums (slipper orchids) – beautiful woodland plants that are not easy to find.”

Tips: People considering creating a garden from scratch should know their design sense; do they like straight lines and a contemporary look or a curved cottage-style, Ms. Tuyp says.

“If you want a vegetable garden, you need a minimum of six hours of sun a day,” she adds.

She says raised beds are wonderful for people in their 70s to avoid constant bending. They also are good for drainage, she says, since they are usually lined with gravel and because the earth stays warmer longer in a raised bed, plants like tomatoes and strawberries do well in them.

Allison Luke, 39, Vancouver

Allison Luke, principal instructor for the UBC Botanical Garden Horticulture Training Program, says gardening trends have changed.

Today, more gardeners want to grow food for themselves and plants that attract and nourish pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and birds.

“God bless my Nana,” Ms. Luke says. “She had these beautiful barrels overflowing with petunias. But now we have to check a lot more boxes than just ornamental plants.”

She says gardeners today also need to conserve water because of water restrictions, protect insect populations and keep biodiversity in urban spaces.

For retirees starting a garden or planning to step up their gardening game now that they have more time, some preparation is in order.

“I would start with a wants and needs list,” says Ms. Luke. Some might want to feed their family. Retirees may not need to include a kid’s play space in their yard. There are several resources on the internet and both online and in-person courses for people planning a garden.

Find out what kind of soil you have with a soil sample kit, Ms. Luke suggests. And make sure the right plant is in the right place in terms of its need for sun.

And don’t try to do everything in one year. “The best gardens I know are built slowly over time.”

Ms. Luke also recommends aids and adaptations to prevent injury. For example, there are kneeling pads and back braces available. Good design, such as planters that allow gardeners to sit while working, can also help.

“There’s a happy medium between overusing your body and not using it. Gardening can be that.”