

Gardening Can Be Remarkably Physical!

Downloaded from <https://www.parentmap.com/article/7-best-strength-exercises-for-gardeners>
The website has videos to illustrate each exercise.

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There are plenty of websites out there that will tell you why yard work is a great workout while you're doing it, but if you don't want that first big project of the season to kick your butt (and your lower back, and your shoulders, and...), it helps to be in garden-ready physical condition right from the get-go. Even if the extent of your gardening is a little weed pulling and some tomato and basil plucking for a summer *caprese* salad, good all-around physical condition will make the trot from the kitchen to the herb bed that much easier.

Here are the seven best exercises to do before gardening season gets going -- so you'll be ready when it does. You can perform these motions at a gym or at home -- all you need are a pair of appropriately heavy weights or kettlebells and a little floor or garden space.

1. Dumbbell Deadlift

Mimics: Bending over to pull a weed, lift a rock, or pick up a bag of compost. Really, any time you bend over and pick something up, you are performing a deadlift. Practice dumbbell or barbell deadlifts in the off-season and your lower back and legs will be stronger when gardening season gets going.

Focus on: Letting the dumbbells or the bar slide along your legs through the entire motion, and keep your back and shoulders strong so your spine doesn't round down. As you add weight in the deadlift, you begin to work your grip strength as well, which is important for keeping hold of sledgehammers and heavy buckets.

2. Front-Loaded Squat

Mimics: Carrying bags of compost, soil amendments, rocks, or kids in front of you. Strengthens your butt, thighs, and entire core. The squat and deadlift are, hands-down, the best all-over strength-building exercises you can perform.

Focus on: Keeping your weight in your heels -- if necessary, point your toes up toward the ceiling to ensure that you are squatting *back* rather than *down*. Keep your lower back in neutral alignment through the entire motion; don't let your back round forward towards the ground. Start with very little weight and work up as you get stronger.

3. Farmer Carry

Mimics: Carrying buckets of water, compost, or soil amendments through the garden. If you've ever carried a bag of groceries in each hand, you've already performed a farmer carry. Up the weight you can handle through diligent practice of the farmer carry and you'll strengthen your grip and forearms substantially and make hauling all those buckets all over the yard much easier.

Focus on: Keeping your abdominal muscles tight and engaged and keeping the weight under control -- no big swings. If you don't have heavy enough weights to make this simple motion a challenge, grab a few large filled water bottles. I keep three-gallon bottles filled with emergency water in the garage. Topped up with water, they weigh about 25 pounds each.

4. Diagonal Wood Chop

Mimics: Chopping logs, rotating to weed, pulling and reaching items in the garden, overhead hammering of posts and tree stakes. Wood chop is a great all-around exercise because it incorporates both strength and stability work. Wood chop strengthens the entire abdominal girdle, arms, and back stabilizers, which means less fatigue and back pain after a long day working in the yard.

Focus on: Keeping a strong core as you perform a controlled but forceful diagonal lift of a manageable weight from the outside of one knee up and over to above the opposite shoulder and back down. Your torso should rotate, but your feet should stay fixed (though it is fine for the active foot to pivot in place). Wood chop may be performed with varying degrees of squat -- I find the amount I squat in the motion is proportional to the weight I am using, with lighter weights requiring less squat at the beginning of the lift. Performed dynamically, this exercise can quickly become a cardio-conditioner as well. Because of the dynamic torso rotation, be cautious if you are new to the diagonal wood chop.

5. Push-Ups

Mimics: Pushing wheelbarrow loads and push-mowers through the garden. Push-ups work your entire upper body, including your chest, arms, and core. Strength in pushing is important to gardeners because we always need to push something around the yard: compost, yard waste containers, lawn-mowers, etc. If challenges keep you motivated, take the [100 Push-up Challenge](#) and learn to rock this important upper-body exercise.

Focus on: Keeping your body in a straight line from toe to head. Don't let your back arch or sway. Keep your elbows tucked in against your torso to more fully engage the triceps muscle. If a full push-up is too challenging, perform a modified push-up. Remember to shift your weight off your kneecap and up to the very bottom of your quadriceps (thigh) muscle, and to establish the same strong, straight body line in a modified push-up as you would have in a full push-up.

6. Renegade Rows

Mimics: Raking, pulling out well-rooted weeds, starting gas lawnmowers. Rows are sort of like inverse push-ups. Everything a push-up does for your chest and pushing ability, rows do for your back and pulling ability. Most people think of yard work as pulling -- pulling weeds! But we gardeners pull recalcitrant rocks, re-bar stakes, tangled vines and brambles, and more as well. Renegade Rows have the added advantage of working the core stabilizer muscles.

Focus on: Just like the push-up, you want to keep your body in as straight a line as possible. Pull your abdominal muscles in or alternatively pull your weight up, keeping about a 90-degree bend in your elbow. Kick your feet about shoulder-width apart to make balance easier.

7. Walking Lunges

Mimics: Weeding. The motion you use to get down on one knee and propose, tie a shoelace, or pull a weed is a lunge. Lunges work your butt and thighs like nothing else and are great for balance and stabilizer training. Gardeners who get strong in the lunge will avoid the temptation to constantly bend over with an arched back (which leads to a sore back!) when they need to get close to the ground.

Focus on: A smooth down-up motion of the entire torso in the lunge. Try not to lean down and forward as you lunge. Instead, think of a smooth drop and an engaged lift. Don't let your knee bang the ground; if you cannot control a full-depth lunge right away, just don't drop as deeply until you build up your strength.

Once you master the lunge, you can make things more challenging with the walking lunge, performed with (as here) or without additional weight.

Put these exercises together and prepare to get into better gardening shape than ever before. Here's a quick, 12-minute circuit example workout to get you started.

Summary: Busy Gardeners' Strength Circuit

3 Minute Blast -- Do not rest between the following exercises:

Deadlift -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute.

Farmer carry -- Walk around the house or yard with an appropriately challenging weight for one minute.

Lunges (left leg forward or walking lunges) -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute.

Rest one minute.

3 Minute Blast -- Do not rest between the following exercises:

Push-ups -- Do as many as you can perform using good form in one minute.

Diagonal wood chop (right side) -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute.

Diagonal wood chop (left side) -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute.

Rest one minute.

3 Minute Blast -- Do not rest between the following exercises:

Front-loaded squat -- Do as many as you can perform performed with good form in one minute.

Renegade rows -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute,

Lunges (right leg forward or walking lunges) -- Do as many as you can perform with good form in one minute.

Relax one minute.

If you want to make real strength gains, record your "score" for each activity -- the number of reps you are able to complete in one minute -- and try to beat your previous score each time you perform this circuit. If you are already in great shape, make this circuit harder by using heavier weights or performing it twice or three times through.

After a few weeks, no deep-rooted weed will stand a chance against you!