

Vertical gardening, such as this shown on a trellis allows, disabled people to sit or stand and not stoop down to garden climbing vines. The trellis has twine, which after the growing season can be cut down.

People with limited mobility don't have to miss out on joy of gardening

By KATHY BARBERICH
The Fresno Bee

Kneeling to pull weeds, reaching up to prune tall bushes and digging to plant bulbs might seem routine to most gardeners, but to people with physical limitations, such as Alice Westerling of Kingsburg, Calif., those can be daunting tasks.

Westerling often uses a wheelchair because of weakness and pain resulting from fibromyalgia, a chronic muscle and soft-tissue pain disorder. One of her legs was crushed in three places during an accident last year.

"I've had to give up a lot of things, including hobbies," she says, "but I refuse to give up gardening. Even though I get frustrated because I can't do what I used to, I try to focus on what I can do."

What she can do is plant things in containers while seated at her patio table, prune some of her roses from the wheelchair and clip dead flowers as needed. "And sometimes while I am resting, I do garden planning," she says. "I figure out what plants and flowers are needed in what areas, then I go to the nursery and shop. Friends and a gardener help with the planting."

"Gardening feeds my soul," says Westerling. "It gives me peace. I like the smells, the texture, the feel of gardening. I like putting my hands in dirt. Gardening, growing things makes you feel like you are part of the process of life. It puts you in touch with the Earth. I think if everyone had a garden to tend, the world would be a better place because people would feel better."

Master Gardener Karena Beasley Garcia of Fresno, Calif., who suffered a spinal injury in an accident, believes

MORE INFO

BOOKS

◆ "Accessible Gardening for People With Physical Disabilities: A Guide to Methods, Tools and Plants" by Janeen R. Adil (Woodbine House, \$16.95).

◆ "Accessible Gardening: Tips and Techniques for Seniors and the Disabled" by Joann Way (Stackpole Books, \$16.95).

◆ "Horticulture as Therapy: A Practical Guide to Using Horticulture As a Therapeutic Tool" by Mitchell L. Hewson (Idyll Arbor, \$35).

◆ "Healing Garden: A Natural Haven for Body, Senses and Spirit" by Sue

Minter (Charles E. Tuttle Co., \$19.95).

◆ "Landscape Design for Elderly and Disabled People" by Jane Stoneham and Peter Thoday (Antique Collectors Club Publishing, \$49.50).

WEB SITES

◆ www.accessiblegardening.com: Special hand tools and raised beds are for sale.

◆ www.dynamic-living.com/gardening.htm: Articles about accessible gardening are found here.

◆ www.simplegardens.com/Garden.html: This site includes pictures of portable high-rise garden beds.

that where there's a will there's a way.

"You can be creative and resourceful," she says, "whether you have a large yard, a small patio, a balcony or a single flower bed at a retirement home." She cites the use of planters, containers and raised beds. "Put your gardening within your reach," she says. "Make it work for you." At her home, she does her gardening in pots.

"People need to ask themselves what it is that is preventing them from gardening, and then try to remove that barrier," she says. "That's what we call barrier-free gardening, enabling gardening and adaptive gardening. The key to this kind of gardening is independence."

Garcia teaches classes in adaptive gardening at the Garden of the Sun, a demonstration garden in Fresno, run by volunteers as part of the University of California Cooperative Extension Office. She also has helped develop a no-barriers section at the garden to help people with limitations imagine gardening possibilities.

"Gardeners are by nature creative," Garcia says. "They

just have to think creatively to adapt things to their needs."

Pathways should be wide enough for wheelchairs and scooters and should have a hard surface.

Garcia recommends trellis gardening, using twine to fashion the trellis, to grow plants vertically so they are easier to reach and maintain. "When the season is over and the plants die, just snip the string and everything comes down readily," she says.

Raised beds are good for those who use wheelchairs and others who cannot bend over. The beds can be built waist-high and just wide enough to accommodate one's reach.

Planting also can be done in

tall pots or pots placed on top of crates, bricks or other pots.

If you don't need raised planting areas but you have some trouble getting up and down, she advises attaching a grab bar or safety bar on the side of the house or on a fence near where you kneel.

For the visually impaired, Garcia recommends placing wind chimes in areas of the garden to help keep the person oriented and keeping a portable phone handy in case of emergency.

The main thing, says Garcia, is to figure out what it is you want to grow, how and where you want to grow it and how you are going to care for it.