



Gardening is a habit I will never give up

Writer, lecturer and garden designer Mary Keen on ways to work around advancing years

Above: watercolour of *Ilex* (holly) from the RHS Lindley Library, painted about 1833 by Caroline Maria Applebee.

When my husband and I were younger, the children used to come out in the garden in their pyjamas saying 'aren't you ever coming indoors?' We hacked brambles out with mattocks and wrestled with climbers off perilous ladders. I can still use a mattock, which is handy in the stony Cotswolds if you want to plant anything, but ladders get scary as you age. Now we are at the time when *everyone* asks when we will give up the garden and come indoors.

I see no reason to abandon the

enjoyable habit of a lifetime. Of course one does less: four to six hours is probably more sensible than ten. The important thing is to keep going and to do a little as often as you can. A couple of hours every day all through the year is ideal, because you do stiffen up as you age and going at heavy work fast is

not sensible at any time of life.

Designer and plantswoman Penelope Hobhouse planted her last garden with shrubs that she thought would take over by the time she could not manage the work. More shrubs may be

one answer, but it is not mine. If you can forget about standards and accept some untidiness, the way to go in borders is native planting, with self-seeders and colonisers around a few well-chosen shrubs.

Plants I would allow free range on my soil are valerian in the best red or white form (not both, as murky pink will be the result), Welsh poppies, most of the umbellifer tribe (especially *Cenolophium denudatum* which does well in shade), *Eryngium giganteum* (Miss Willmott's ghost), *Lunaria annua* 'Corfu Blue' and blue-flowered *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat'). Others include *Lychnis coronaria*,

Helleborus foetidus and foxgloves. This may be too flowery and cottagey for some, but you get the idea. To reduce your workload, choose things you like that will take over and if they get the upper hand you can reduce the population. With a mattock if need be. Underplant with bulbs such as snowdrops to cheer you up in winter.

Climbers and high hedges are harder to deal with as you get older. You cannot let them go, but you can reduce the height and invest in a Japanese tripod ladder. From the tallest platform one, you can prune and tie a rose at more than 3m (10ft) tall and feel totally safe with a rail to lean against. Your hedges would need to be reduced to 1.8m (6ft) for comfort – hedge cutting above the head is tiring work – so if you want to stay in your own garden and not come indoors yet, it may be worth investing in some labour for hedge reduction first.

Lawns need not be perfect. If you must have one, accept moss and daisies. If not, try long grass with bulbs and paths through it. The mowing of the long grass two or three times a year can be done quickly with a hired scythe mower. Raking is tiresome, so spread the work over a couple of days. If you only have a small piece of long grass try sharing the cost of the hire (about £66 a day) with a friend or neighbour.

It seems a pity to give up on growing vegetables but if your back hates digging try the no-dig method. The spreading of compost or manure annually is heavy work, but an electric barrow would really lighten the load. Tools are marvellous now, and although I dislike using machines I see that they are useful as life gets harder.

One of the advantages of age is that you mind much less what others think. If you are still enjoying the garden and can relax a bit, then carry on. Spend more time fussing over small things in pots. Stop worrying about perfection. And don't come indoors until it is dark. ●

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