

Getting started

Are you interested in gardening or did you enjoy gardening before you started losing your sight? Thrive can help you start or continue gardening when you have sight loss.

Just being in the garden can make you feel good. Gardening is also a great way of keeping active and can get you out and about. It can be a very social activity whether you are chatting to neighbours over the garden fence or joining a gardening club.

Thrive has worked with gardeners who have sight loss for more than 30 years and during this time we have collected a wealth of gardening hints and tips.

Thrive encourages you to be independent from the outset, to help you gain confidence and experience the pleasure of achievement. We encourage you to do as much as possible for yourself. However seeking advice and even help from sighted gardeners may at times prove necessary and valuable.

Here are some ideas to help you get started in gardening and some sources of further information.

Getting started in your garden

Taking a bit of time to get ready can really make a difference. Some of the stresses and strains of gardening happen when we begin a job on impulse, without any planning.

To ensure you get ready properly:

Getting ready

- If you are just starting to garden with sight loss, you might find it useful to get to know your garden better by walking around it at different times of the day until you are familiar with it.
- Always manage your part of the garden yourself. If you need some help with all or part of a job, ask for it, if not then carry on working independently. This way, you'll become a much more confident gardener.
- People who have sight loss can sometimes find it difficult to find their way back to where they were in the garden. One idea is to use an RNIB sound beacon, or take a small radio with you and leave it on while you are working.
- A washing line can also provide a point of reference in the garden and you can use it as a guide to help you know where you are.
- Think about the job you're going to do and plan what will make it easier for you. It might be as simple as making sure you have a kneeler with you to save your knees, or a stool or seat to work from or to take more rests.
- Get all the tools you'll need together to save trips back and forth to the shed, garage or house. Try and keep your storage area tidy and you'll be able to find your tools more easily.

Taking care

- Take time to warm up first with some simple bending and stretching exercises to loosen up your muscles and you will be less likely to strain yourself.
- On very cold days, it might be worth waiting until the air warms up before you begin, or start work in a sunny area first.
- Stick to one job at a time, and have breaks - with a warm or cold drink according to the weather. Stop work before you get too tired.
- You might find it easier to move your equipment around the garden in relay fashion, taking your chair out first, then your tools.
- If you find it difficult to carry things, you might need to base your activities near the house or the place you keep your gardening equipment.

Equipment and tools

- If you have some vision, you'll find your tools easier to spot if they have bright handles. Or you can paint the handles white.
- Most gardeners who have sight loss like to work close to the soil and often use short handled tools. There is now a whole range of 'multi-change' tools with snap on interchangeable heads. Choose a handle length that's right for you - 30cm (12 inch) is popular.
- Make sure you choose the right tools for the job. Try out tools before you buy them, if you can, and check for weight and comfort. Choose well balanced and lightweight tools to help prevent stresses and strains in your hands and arms.
- If you have a weak grip, hand tools will be easier to hold if you slide some plumber's insulating tubing over the handle, or there are specialist ranges with wide spongy grips.
- Find the best way for you to carry your tools. You could use a garden cart, wheelbarrow or bucket. A garden cart with an aluminium frame allows you to carry long tools and hand tools with smaller items in its tray. It also holds a refuse sack.

- Hand tools can be carried in a tool belt, apron or bag – whatever you find easy. Secateurs can be safely carried in a holster.

Planning your garden

Many people find it helpful to start small and work on a small part of the garden or in containers until you gain confidence.

Garden layout can make a real difference to how you enjoy gardening.

When thinking about the design of your garden and the planting scheme, try and choose plants that are easy to grow and don't need much maintenance.

Layout

- You'll find your garden easier to manage and get around if it is laid out on the square, with straight paths and borders.
- Landmarks around the garden are useful to help you find your way around. Shrubs or trees, scented or tactile plants, items such as benches, and sound – from rustling plants, running water, or wind chimes, can all help you find your way.
- Avoid large lawns and lawns with sharply curved edges as they will be more time consuming to maintain. Consider having a semi-wild lawn with mown paths to save time and effort.
- Borders will be more manageable if you can reach across them easily. So make your flower borders no more than 60cm (2 foot) wide if you have access from one side, or 120cm (4 foot) wide if you can reach from all sides.
- Containers and raised beds look attractive and are ideal if you want to start gardening on a small scale. A raised bed can be raised just a few inches, or could be at a comfortable height to use sitting down.
- Planting in containers is a simple way of ensuring that your plants are easier to look after. You can vary the heights and bring the garden to the best level for you. Many vegetables as well as flowers and shrubs do well in containers.

Paths

- You'll feel safer and will be able to get things done faster if all your paths are even, with a surface that gives good grip. You can mark any changes in the direction of your paths with a change in texture, or a change in colour, or with a marker like an ornament.
- Don't let plants over-hang your paths. Some gardeners who have sight loss edge their borders with a low kerb that keeps soil in and is helpful if you use a cane.
- If you use a wheelchair or walking aid, paths in the garden and the greenhouse need to be wide enough and with ample turning room; a 1m (3 foot) wide path is recommended as a minimum.

Steps

- Some people find it helpful to highlight step and path edges and fencing with white paint.
- Consider replacing steps with a ramp. A ramp gradient of 1:15 is recommended as a general guide.
- Both steps and ramps are easier to use if there is a sturdy handrail alongside. Ideally a handrail should begin at least a metre before the first step up or down.

Plants

- Plant grasses for sound and touch.
- Although scented plants are a bonus, don't have too many as a mass of scent might be confusing.
- Many people who have sight loss find they can still see yellow, white and blue flowers for longer than other colours. Choose plants, tools and containers in colours that work best for you.
- Plant pale coloured plants against a dark shrub, a fence or a dark coloured mulch, and they will stand out more.
- Plant in blocks or lines to help you identify plants and to make more of a colour or scent impact in an area of the garden.

- Choose plants that like the conditions for each area of your garden. They will need less attention to grow well.
- It also helps to choose plants that are easy to maintain, that are thornless and don't need much pruning.
- Make sure that trees and shrubs are the right size for the space you have. This will save you having to prune and cut back as they grow.
- Get rid of plants that cause you problems – rampant growers, plants that take up too much space, are hazardous to you, or cast too much shade.
- If you would like to grow fruit trees, choose espalier or cordon trained varieties. These grow at a lower level and the fruit is within reach.
- Hedges provide good screening in a garden but usually require cutting back. To make things easier, consider alternatives that are still wildlife-friendly, such as a wall or fence with climbing plants covering the surface.

Seed Sowing

Many gardeners who have sight loss avoid sowing seeds in the open ground. Sow seeds in seed trays or other containers and plant out the resulting plants at an early stage. Full details on how to successfully sow seeds can be found in the book **Getting on with Gardening Vol.1**.

Another option for sowing seeds is to use Seed tapes; these are commercially produced fine paper tapes with seeds sandwiched between layers at regular intervals. The seed tapes are produced by **Suttons Seeds**.

To use the tapes, prepare the soil by clearing the site to produce a level area with no weeds and no large stones. Use a small hoe to create a shallow trough. Lay the seed tape along the trough and cut to the desired length, mark each end and draw the soil over to cover the tape to a depth of 1cm (1/2 inch). Water in well using a

watering can with a rose to avoid washing away the soil. Remember to water daily until the seeds germinate. The tapes can also be used in containers.

Getting on with it - more ideas for you from Thrive

We can help with gardening advice by telephone, email or post to help you with any gardening questions you may have. (Contact details are at the end of this leaflet).

Visit our website www.carryongardening.org.uk with easier ways to do everyday gardening jobs, tried-and-tested gardening equipment and tools, and a special section for people who have sight loss.

Thrive can send you FREE:

- **Gardening yearbook** with 55 pages of seasonal advice on your food and flower gardens plus ideas on tools and equipment.

Also available for you to buy:

Getting on with Gardening books – the essential guides to gardening when you have sight loss, full of useful tried and tested gardening techniques devised by people who have sight loss. They are available in large print, on audio CD and tape, Daisy audio CD and Braille. Written by Thrive and published by RNIB, with funding from the Big Lottery Fund, they cost just £5.00 per volume to members of the National Blind Gardeners' Club and £7.50 to non members.

Volume 1 has information on seed sowing, potting, gardening outside, tools and equipment, raised beds, preparing the ground, planting and watering.

Volume 2 expands the gardener's knowledge with sections on taking cuttings, container growing, more gardening outside, protected growing, pruning, the lawn, pests and diseases and labelling.

Getting on with growing food is a full-colour guide to start growing your own vegetables and fruit.

Getting on with growing in containers is a full colour guide to growing in containers which includes; choosing containers, how to plant and maintain them and planting suggestions.

Each of these books has large, clear diagrams in print or tactile versions and a wealth of tips from gardeners including the winners of the Blind Gardener of the Year competitions.

Why not join Thrive?

As a member you will receive:

A welcome pack which includes:

- a 32-page full-colour *Guide to Thrive* booklet
- an inspirational CD of stories and experiences of disabled people who have benefited from gardening
- Gardening Yearbook. A 55 page full colour publication giving month-by-month gardening advice and tips for the fruit, veg and flower garden.

plus

- A quarterly magazine which has interesting plant reviews, ideas for food and flower gardening, details of new tools and equipment and features on reader's gardens and their top tips.

This magazine is available in large print, on audio CD, Braille and by email.

- Access to a specialist audio gardening library containing a wide range of titles.
- Great discounts on our publications
- Great discounts on our **Getting on with Gardening** books.

Meeting other gardeners who have sight loss through Thrive

- In some areas, local gardening clubs of people who have sight loss have been formed. Some have been organised through a local voluntary association; some through social workers and some have grown from the driving force of a person who has sight loss. To see if there is a club near you just call us here at Thrive.

If you would like to start a local club, Thrive can support you; we have a free guide to starting a local club called **Gardening Together**, this is available in large print, audio CD and Braille. For a copy or more information call Thrive.

Check our website **www.thrive.org.uk** or call us on **0118 988 5688** for more details.

Getting out and about!

There are many gardens open to the public around the country, run by a variety of organisations, which can make an enjoyable trip out. Group visits can often be arranged and in some cases guided tours of the gardens are available by arrangement.

The largest gardens are:

- The Eden Project, Bodelva, St. Austell, Cornwall, PL24 2SG
W: **www.edenproject.com**, T: 01726 811 911

- The National Botanic Garden of Wales, Llanarthney, Camarthen, SA32 8HG
W: www.gardenofwales.org.uk, T: 01558 668 768
- Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew Richmond, Surrey, TW9 3AB.
W: www.rbgekew.org.uk, T: 0208 332 5000
- Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, EH3 5LR, Scotland.
W: www.rbge.org.uk, T: 0131 552 7171
- Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) Gardens, at Wisley, Harlow Carr, Rosemoor and Hyde Hall,. Contact the RHS at 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P2PE
W: www.rhs.org.uk, T: 0845 260 5000
- Garden Organic, , Coventry, Warwickshire, CV8 3LG
W: www.gardenorganic.org.uk, T: 024 7630 3517

Other people's gardens:

Each year The National Gardens Scheme publishes 'Gardens of England and Wales' which lists gardens open on specific days during the year. Contact them at Hatchlands Park, East Clandon, Guildford, Surrey, GU4 7RT

W: www.ngs.org.uk, T: 01483 211535.

It's a good idea to call the garden concerned before visiting if you want to clarify any concerns about accessibility, including whether or not you can take a guide dog.

Booklets of gardens in each county are available from county organisers of the scheme, or from local shops or tourist information offices.

A similar scheme exists in Scotland, contact The Scottish Gardens Scheme, 31 Castle Terrace, Edinburgh, EH7 2ELT: 0131 229 1870.

The National Trust has many gardens and properties throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Contact the National Trust, PO Box 39, Warrington, WA5 7WD
W: www.nationaltrust.org.uk, T: 0844 800 1895

For properties in Scotland, contact the National Trust for Scotland,
Wemyss House, 28 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, EH2 4ET
W: www.nts.org.uk, T: 0844 493 2100,
E: information@nts.org.uk

For properties in Northern Ireland contact the National Trust for
Northern Ireland
W: www.ntni.org.uk, T: 028 9751 0721

In wilder places:

For those who want to venture further, there is, of course, the
whole countryside to explore.

The Sensory Trust has information on access to the countryside
for people who have a disability. Contact them at The Sensory
Trust, Watering Lane Nursery, Pentewan, Cornwall, PL26 6BE
W: www.sensorytrust.org.uk, T: 017 2622 2900

Please contact Thrive to request a copy of this leaflet in an
alternative format.

Thrive is a small national charity that uses gardening to change
the lives of disabled people.

Thrive registered charity no. 277570.

Contact Thrive at: The Geoffrey Udall Centre, Beech Hill, Reading
RG7 2AT

W: www.thrive.org.uk and www.carryongardening.org.uk
T: 0118 988 5688, E: info@thrive.org.uk