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Plant And Rake Without The Ache **By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil**

The warm weather is finally upon us and the spring cleaning has begun. Cleaning and yard work can often wake up muscles and joints that have been laying dormant over the winter months. This brings about some health and safety concerns. Following some basic guidelines can minimize these risks.

Muscles should be warmed up before starting any exercise regimen and gardening falls into that category. A set of stretches at least to the major muscle groups should be performed. Stretching the calves, quadriceps (thighs), hamstrings (posterior thighs), lower back, shoulders and neck, can help avoid muscle pulls and joint sprains.

Ensure you stay hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids before, during and after working in the yard. It will force you to take some short breaks and give your system a chance to cool down, avoiding exhaustion. Using the right equipment can also reduce the risk of personal injury. Long handled tools can help reduce bending and reaching. It is beneficial to avoid overhead work when possible. When working in flower beds, kneeling on all fours is preferred to standing and bending over.

Work directly in front of your body where possible to avoid twisting or reaching, which can put greater strain on muscles and joints. Alternate your work between light and heavy jobs so you don't wear yourself out all at once. Turn heavy loads into two or three loads or have a friend help with the lifting. Be sure to keep your back straight while lifting, and always lift with your legs and not your back. Never twist your back while pulling or lifting. Always lift your feet and pivot to avoid putting your back in a vulnerable position.

After a hard day's work in the yard, it is important to again cool down. This doesn't mean sit in the lazy boy to watch the hockey game. It means spending ten minutes again stretching the same major muscle groups you did prior to work. This cool down period can be much more important than you realize in proper recovery. Stretching muscles after working helps blood and oxygen reach tight muscle fibers and remove lactic acid buildup. This can greatly reduce the pain and stiffness often experienced over the next few days.

Following these tips will greatly reduce the chances of injury. Some stiffness and soreness may be unavoidable. Backache and muscle pain that lasts longer than 48 hours may require some intervention, as it may indicate an underlying condition. See your chiropractor. Chiropractors are trained to detect and treat spinal problems and maximize nervous system function. A properly aligned spine can help quicken recovery and it is the key to maximizing health.