

GETTING THE BODY READY FOR SPRING

By Ann Slater

As a small-scale market gardener, my most important piece of equipment is my body. My muscles can replace much of the work my equipment and tools do for me, but those same tools cannot replace the daily work done by my hands, my back, my knees and the rest of my body.

We all know that farming is a dangerous occupation. Although the potential injuries from large machinery and large livestock may be more severe, market gardeners are not immune from injuries and pain that can affect our ability to continue farming and to enjoy life. Back pain is likely the most common injury for market gardeners but we are also at risk from other cumulative injuries, like repetitive stress on hands and wrist joints from transplanting, harvesting or weeding.

After a long and physically stressful growing season, winter seems like a good time to rest our bodies and curl up in a comfy chair with a pile of seed catalogues or a good novel. However, winter is also a time to look at how we will keep our muscles and joints free of pain and injury in the coming season.

I am now more physically prepared to start the busy spring season than I was in my younger days.

As I have grown older, I have come to realize the importance of paying more attention to the physical needs of my most important piece of equipment over the winter season. I am now more physically prepared to start the spring than I was in my younger days and have fewer sore muscles at the end of a busy spring day.

The slower winter season is a time for me to tackle two types of activities to help keep my body free of pain and injury during the long growing season to come. In the winter, I focus on:

- 1) Evaluating, adapting and choosing tools, equipment and work methods to make my work less stressful on my body, and
- 2) Finding ways to keep my body in good physical condition.

Evaluating tools, equipment and work practices

Often in the midst of a busy growing season, it can be difficult to find the time to change tools, equipment or work methods but this is the best time to jot down notes on changes that may reduce stress on your body. Then you can take time in the winter to evaluate and research potential changes.

Talking with other farmers, especially farmers of a similar size and stature, about their tools and equipment and how they do the physical work on their farms, is a useful way to evaluate your own operation and get new ideas.

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Healthy Farmers–Healthy Profits project looks at methods that help improve the health, safety and profits of growers, particularly market gardeners, berry farmers, nursery operators and dairy farmers. They have a number of tip sheets on their website (<http://bse.wisc.edu/hfhp>) about tools and methods that can improve the efficiency of fieldwork and post-harvest handling on market gardens, while also reducing the risk of pain and injury.

The tip sheets may help you evaluate your own tools, equipment and practices to see if you can make any changes with little or no cost. Some of their tips seem like basic common sense, such as having an efficiently organized packing area or customizing work



Ann Slater on her farm.

stations to the height of the worker and the task. Their suggestions may help you make small but significant changes to alleviate the stress on your body and the bodies of your co-workers. In addition, they have information and plans for low-tech equipment, such as a customized seated work cart my father built for me several years ago for about \$200.

Choices I have made to lessen physical stress:

- A well balanced 8-horsepower BCS rototiller (some cheaper makes are not as well balanced and are therefore more difficult to handle).*
- A long-handled collinear hoe designed for dealing with small weeds while in a standing position. (Note: several other hoes have similar benefits.)
- A wheel hoe to cut small weeds quickly, efficiently and with minimum muscle power.*

* If workers of different heights are using the equipment, you may want to have handles with an easily adjustable length.

- A compact pick-up truck so I can easily reach over the sides to pull out bags of CSA produce without straining my arms and shoulders.
- Racks on my truck with a shelf and no roof to bring produce to the farmers' market. The table and stands are packed on the bottom, along with a minimal amount of produce, so the stand can be set up before most produce

is removed from the truck. With an open top on the higher level where most of the produce rides, I can easily load and unload without being hunched over. (Note: my farmers' market is ten minutes from the farm, so I do not have to worry too much about the produce being exposed to the elements on the trip to market.)

As a small-scale market gardener, my most important piece of equipment is my body.

- A wash station with 'tables' of different heights, so I can choose the most comfortable height for the specific task.
- An elevated tub for washing lettuce and other greens so I can work standing up, rather than stooped over.
- A customized seated work cart, built with plans from Healthy Farmers–Healthy Profits, which allows me to pick greens by sitting



Ann Slater on the work cart her father built for \$200 with plans from <http://bse.wisc.edu/hfhp>.

directly over the bed, rather than bending over or squatting.

Keeping my body ready for the growing season

Throughout my time as a market gardener, I have always been physically active over the winter, whether from looking after livestock or taking part in winter sports like hockey or cross-country skiing. Before, I expected to have sore muscles in the spring, especially early in the season. However, as I moved into my 40s, the sore muscles took longer to go away. I realized that I should be more intentional in keeping my body in good physical condition from season to season. I now have fewer sore muscles and fewer sore joints over the growing season than I did when I was younger.

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I am not a fitness expert; my only expertise is in finding ways to keep my muscles and joints ready for the next growing season. My parents, while not experts, are trained volunteer exercise class leaders for the local seniors centre. The program they follow was developed by the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging, which promotes physical activity and well being for older adults. Although the classes they lead are organized by the local seniors' centre, not all of the participants are seniors. Similar

classes are likely available in rural communities in many parts of the country.

When I asked my parents what a good winter exercise program for market gardeners should include, they suggested:

- Flexibility (i.e. stretching) and their recommendation is to do exercises that you hold for at least twenty seconds, like yoga moves.
- Strength, which can come from yoga or from using weights.
- Balance which requires both strength and concentration.
- Coordination/dexterity which comes from movements like dancing which require leg and arm motion at the same time.
- Endurance or cardiovascular workouts where you get your heart rate up for 30 minutes or more. A good test is being able to talk while you exercise but still be a bit breathless.

Back pain is a common problem for market gardeners. Building stomach muscles, along with strengthening the lower back muscles, can help prevent back pain.

What do I do over the winter to keep my body ready for the next growing season? I do yoga and other exercises including some that use weights. I skate and cross country ski, both of which can build stamina, strength and flexibility. However, they are also sports that can easily be done at a leisurely pace, which will not have the same impact, especially in terms of building stamina. The technical skills I have in those sports allow me to push myself and turn a cross-country ski through the fields or an hour of skating at the local rink into good workouts to build my endurance.

If you do not have yoga, tai chi or exercise classes available, I would suggest checking your local library for information. I have found many useful books, as well as suggestions for strength and stretching exercises in women's magazines like *Canadian Living*. You may also find videos or TV programs with valuable suggestions.

A good winter exercise program includes flexibility, strength, balance, coordination and cardiovascular training.

Of course, as market gardeners, we are all likely to experience some sore muscles or joints over the long growing season. A market gardener in my area has found one solution—he provides his massage therapist with a CSA share in return for regular massage therapy.

Ann Slater has been growing and selling vegetables to the people of St. Marys and the surrounding communities in Southwestern Ontario for over thirty years. Since the mid-1990s, the small, intensive 1.5-acre market garden has been her full-time occupation. One of the reasons she has kept her market garden small is because she loves doing the physical labour herself, rather than managing hired help to plant, harvest or take care of the weeds.

Photo credits: the Slater family