

Gardening with Asthma and Allergies and Creating an Allergy-friendly Garden



Tips for Gardening with Asthma and Creating an Allergy-friendly Garden

An estimated 490,000 people in Ireland have asthma and more than 1 in 10 suffer with allergic rhinitis (hay fever). Allergies of all kinds are on the increase in Ireland.

Asthma and allergic rhinitis (hay fever) can be triggered by a reaction to many different allergens including:

- Pollen grains
- Mould spores from decaying vegetation
- Dust which may originate from the garden
- Perfume from certain flowers

Allergies often prohibit people from enjoying their garden and participating in outdoor activities. Allergies vary from one person to another, and different plants will affect different people. It is therefore better not to buy too many plants until you have determined which plants are suitable for you to use.

There is no cure for asthma despite continuing research however we now know much more about what triggers asthma and hay fever and the benefits to be gained from trying to avoid some of these triggers.

Typical allergy symptoms are:

- Sneezing
- Itchy, blocked or runny nose
- Itchy throat, inner ear or mouth
- A loss of concentration and generally feeling unwell.
- Impaired sense of smell
- Red, itchy or watery eyes
- Headaches

Management is key in allergy relief. The fewer allergenic plants in the garden, the less chance of triggering allergies.

In this booklet, the Asthma Society of Ireland demonstrates a few simple measures which can be taken in the garden to lessen exposure to allergens which may help reduce the severity of asthma and allergic rhinitis (hay fever) symptoms. This booklet also gives advice on creating an allergy-friendly garden.



Gardening with Asthma:

When Should I Garden?

It is best to try and get the garden in order in the early spring, when the pollen count is low. In the summer on hot, still days the pollen grains are released. Most pollen is released in the morning and rises skywards with the heat of the day. It then gets blown overland by winds and breezes. The pollen then sinks back to earth late afternoon or early evening as the temperature starts to drop.

Practical Allergy Friendly Gardening tips:

- Shut all your windows before gardening to keep dislodged pollen and dust out of your home.
- Check the pollen forecast before venturing outside. This will give you an idea of how high or low the pollen count is in your area.
- Try to stay indoors if there is a high pollen count. It is advisable to stay in on hot, windy days, as wind will increase pollen in the air.
- Wear wraparound sunglasses, these will help stop pollen blowing into your eyes.
- Smear Vaseline inside your nose. This can help to stop pollen and spores from settling on the lining of your nose. It might sound horrible but it really does work.
- Keep your asthma under control by taking your preventer medication regularly as prescribed. If you suffer from hay fever (allergic rhinitis) consult your doctor about the best medication to keep this under control. Your community pharmacist can also advise you on over the counter products.
- Wear a hat to protect your hair from pollen and brush your hair after gardening. It is advisable to shower and wash your hair after gardening if allergic rhinitis is particularly troublesome for you.
- If you have a skin allergy keep your arms, legs and hands well covered.
- Do not wear your garden clothes in the house. It is advisable to remove shoes before entering the house and to change immediately before or as soon as you enter the house.

Other Recommendations

- Keep cats and dogs outside. This will stop pollen being taken into the house from outside on the animal's coats.
- After gardening or being in the garden, it is recommended to use a saline nasal rinse to clear nasal passages of pollen and dust, to prevent triggering allergies.
- For those with allergies it is advised to use a tumble drying machine to dry clothes. Clothes hung to dry on clothes lines can get covered in grass pollen.
- Picked flowers should be shaken well to rid them of allergens. It is advised to wear a mask while doing this or ask someone else to shake picked flowers before bringing them into the house.
- Don't smell flowers directly. Not all reactions are immediate and many flowers only cause allergy if you directly inhale their fragrance.
- Limit ferns as houseplants. If you have more allergies in winter, you are probably allergic to molds and spores, and should not keep ferns in the house.

Creating an Allergy-friendly Garden

In order to create an allergy-friendly garden, it is vital to understand how plants reproduce. All plants have sexes. Some are male, some are female, some have both sexes on the same plant. In botany there are complicated names for plants and many exceptions to rules. Plant flowering systems can be complex, which has led to great confusion over which plants cause allergies. This booklet sets out in simple terms how to create the most allergy-friendly garden you can.

The most important factors to consider when choosing plants, trees and shrubs for an allergy friendly garden are; the size of the plant, how much pollen it produces and where it is located in the garden. Male trees and shrubs such as *Fraxinus excelsior* (Common Ash), *Acer* (Maple) and *Ilex* (Holly) produce large amounts of pollen. A general tip for allergy friendly gardening is not to plant any male trees or shrubs.

Grass pollen poses the biggest trigger for allergy sufferers. It is vital to mow the lawn regularly as this will help prevent the grass from flowering, resulting in less pollen being released. Female lawns are recommended, as they require less mowing. (Remember to wear a mask which covers your mouth and nose whilst mowing.) If possible get someone else to do mowing.

Please see our recommended list of plants, trees and shrubs to use or avoid in an allergy-friendly garden on page 6 of this booklet.

Flowers such as roses, have both male and female parts inside the same flowers. These flowers also may be called bisexual, hermaphroditic, or complete. The majority of these plants do not cause pollen allergies as the pollen of these plants does not have to travel far for pollination to occur. e.g. *Agapanthus*, *Bergenia* and *Campanula*.



Practical Tips on Creating an Allergy-friendly Garden

- It is important to consider the relatives of a plant. Plants are classified by botanists into large related groups called families. All too often plants with notorious relatives are themselves allergy offenders. Size, shape, color and fragrance should be considered when searching for problem plants.
- Blossoms shaped like trumpets seldom cause allergy because they are designed so that insects must actually crawl into them to contact the pollen. e.g. *Phygelius capanesis* (Cape figwort), *Penstemon*.
- Plants that spread their pollen mainly by wind (this includes most trees, all grasses and some wild flowers, but not fruit trees) cause the majority of allergy problems. The pollen from wind-pollinated plants is light and floats around in the air, it is therefore easier to inhale and can trigger asthma, and allergic rhinitis (hayfever) symptoms.
- Pollen weight is an important factor to consider too. Heavy pollen does not fall far from the plant. Pollens which are extremely light, float off easily in the wind and thus cause many problems for people with allergies. e.g. *Pennisetum setaceum* (Fountain grass).
- Plants which rely on insects to pollinate them usually create less problems for people with allergies. These plants usually release less pollen into the air, and therefore these plants generally cause fewer allergies. Most plants rely on insects to pollinate them.
- Fragrance in plants serves to attract pollinating insects, and fragrant plants do not pose a pollen problem. However some people's allergies are triggered by the fragrance itself and thus these are all factors to consider when creating your allergy-friendly garden. Replace heavily scented plants e.g. Jasmine or wisteria, with gently fragrant herbs such as rosemary or mint.
- Avoid climbing plants around bedroom windows as pollen and dust can blow into nearby windows. Very special care should be taken when choosing plants to place near bedroom windows. For this location plants with a low allergy rating should be chosen. For a sunny wall, Clematis could be used. For a north wall *Parthenocissus* (Virginia creeper) could be used. It is advised not to place these plants near bedroom windows.
- A good many plants only release their pollen at night or in the early morning. Gardeners call these plants "night bloomers". e.g. *Jasminum* (Jasmine).
- Be careful with the use of all insecticides, fungicides and herbicides. Accidental exposure to all of these chemical pesticides has been shown to trigger allergic reactions. A very effective non-toxic insecticide can be made by mixing two teaspoons of liquid dish soap and 3 teaspoons of vegetable or mineral oil into 1 gallon of warm water. This non-toxic insecticide can be sprayed on plants and works well.

Practical Tips on Creating an Allergy Friendly Garden (Cont'd)

- Using suet will attract wild birds into the garden. Wild birds are a big plus in achieving an allergy-friendly garden as they eat so many insects. Insect dander causes allergies and birds consume aphids, whiteflies and other pests.
- Although shrubs are insect pollinated, some are heavily scented. Plant shrubs away from your house, as far down your garden as possible to avoid triggering allergy. The plants, Philadelphus and Phlox both have low allergy ratings.
- Some trees produce large amounts of pollen, especially in summer. Check the list on page 6 for which trees to avoid.

Useful Recommendations

- Grass: Consider replacing the lawn with gravel. If this is not possible remember to shut all your house windows before mowing the lawn. For those who are especially allergic to grass pollen it is advisable to ask someone else to do the mowing. If this is not possible a face mask which covers the nose and mouth should be worn whilst mowing. These face masks filter out many allergenic materials.
- Water: Water fountains should be avoided as falling water creates air currents which cause pollen and dust to become airborne.
- Pots: Pots are an attractive feature in any garden and can be user friendly. Do not bring pots into the house during winter months, as spores can be released from the soil in the heat of a house.
- Weeding: Plant low-allergen ground-cover plants, such as, Vinca (Periwinkle), Geranium (Cranesbill) or Bergenia (Bear ears) to suppress the weeds. It is advisable to avoid bark mulch. Gravel can be used as a non allergenic mulch.
- Hedges: Replace hedges with a fence or any kind of wall. Hedges harbour dust, pollens and mould spores which are released in strong winds and when they are cut or trimmed.
- Compost: Remove all rotting vegetation and compost to avoid moulds growing and releasing their spores into the air. Compost heaps should be removed or kept at the bottom of the garden to avoid triggering allergies.

Important notes

Remember avoidance is key in allergy relief. Avoid being exposed. The fewer allergenic plants in the garden, the less chance of triggering allergies.

If you follow this simple guide to allergy-friendly gardening and creating an allergy-friendly garden you will greatly reduce exposing yourself to allergy triggers and thus enjoy your gardening experience.



Flowers to use

Aquilegia (Colombine)
 Campanula (Bellflower)
 Cyclamen
 Galanthus (Snowdrop)
 Crocus
 Agapanthus
 Delphinium
 Lupin
 Primula
 Paeonia (Paeony rose)
 Strelitzia (Bird of Paradise)
 Orchids (as House Plant)

Trees to use

Sorbus (Mountain Ash)
 Larix (Larch)
 Pyrus (Pear)
 Pinus (Pine)
 Cedrus (Cedar)

Shrubs to use

Azalea
 Potentilla
 Mahonia
 Camellia
 Pieris

Flowers to Avoid

Rumex (dock, sorrel)
 Urtica (Nettles)
 Grasses (Ornamental and Lawn)
 Asters
 Cirsiums (Thistles)
 Chrysanthemums
 Helenium (Sneeze wort)
 Helleborus
 Artemisia
 Anaphalis
 Spinacia Oleracea (Spinach)

Trees to avoid

Salix (Willow)
 Quercus (Oak)
 Platanus (London Plane)
 Betula (Birch)
 Fraxinus (Ash)

Shrubs to avoid

Ligustrum (Privet)
 Forsythia
 Griselinia
 Hedera (Ivy)
 Eleagnus

In the lists you will see that there are a lot of ordinary trees that you see about you every day but studies have shown that the majority of the tree pollen falls to earth a short distance from the tree. The nearer you are to high pollen producing trees the more you will be affected.

It is important to consider the size of plants, trees and shrubs. A tree produces huge amounts of pollen compared to a small plant so you can have a plant in your garden that is allergic but won't affect you as much unless you bend down to sniff it, where as a tree will cover everything in a central radius with pollen.

Further Queries

For further queries on allergies and asthma contact the Asthma Society helpline on **1850 44 54 64** or log onto **www.asthmasociety.ie**

The advice in this booklet is based on the main principles in creating a low allergy garden.

Recommended further reading

- "Allergy-friendly Gardening" by *Thomas Leo Ogren*

This gardening information booklet has been developed with the help of Meadow Garden Designers, www.meadow.ie, and the Kilmurry Nursery, www.kilmurrynursery.com. Special thanks to Asthma Society of Ireland, Asthma Nurse Specialist, Frances Guiney.

"Gardening is the purest of human pleasures" *Sir Frances Bacon.*

Useful addresses

Meadow Garden Designers
1N KCR Business Park
Ravensdale Park
Dublin 12
Tel: 00 353 1 4063034
info@meadow.ie

Kilmurry Nursery
Gorey,
County Wexford
Tel:00 353 (0)539480223
kilmurrynursery@eircom.net

For further information on asthma visit our website at:
www.asthmasociety.ie

Or phone our Asthma Line at 1850 44 54 64.



Asthma Society of Ireland
26 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1
Tel: 01 878 8511
Fax: 01 878 8128
email: office@asthmasociety.ie