

# SELF MASTERY SOJOURNER



The world is round  
And the place which  
May seem like the end  
May also be the beginning.

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## Yoga for Gardeners: Working the Soul

by Jennifer Tufts, Master Gardener

“The many great gardens of the world, of literature and poetry, of painting and music, of religion and architecture, all make the point as clear as possible:

The soul cannot thrive in the absence of a garden.”

– Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, 1996, p. 101

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## Introduction

The practice of yoga has much to offer gardeners. And gardeners are already practicing yoga, although they may not be aware!

Two things I most want to emphasize here are the importance of really seeing your garden and preparing the soil that will allow you and your plants to thrive.

Next time you look at a plant, notice whether it is thriving, or merely surviving. And ask yourself the same question now and then. Are you thriving or are you merely surviving.

Why do you garden?

Most of our daily activities have the potential to become meditations if practiced with mindfulness.

Avid gardeners already understand that working the soil, planting, and breathing in the beauty and aliveness of the earth is an opportunity to find meaning and joy in life.

Gardeners learn quickly about the need to be flexible.

For one thing, there is only so much we can do as gardeners to ensure an outcome in the earth.

The rest is up to forces beyond our control: weather, insects, disease, and other more mysterious elements.

Appreciation of what is actually taking place in your garden at this moment, rather than dwelling on what you wish were happening may make the difference between a positive gardening experience and a frustrating one.

Yoga masters teach that the way to become flexible is to breathe deeply, to relax, and to integrate all facets of your body, mind and spirit.

The practice of Yoga was developed over centuries at a time when human survival was more closely linked to dependence on the earth.

The images of yoga are the images of the natural world: trees, flowers, animals, the stars, the sea.

Just as the soil of our gardens is composed of mineral and organic matter, water and air, our bodies need to find balance between these elements.

Especially early in the season, be gentle and respectful of your body. The tendency to hit the ground running after months of forced dormancy may not be the best thing for your body.

Never strain or force yourself to do more than you should while your body is adjusting to a new activity, whether it be a yoga stretch or a task in your garden.

### **Surrender Your Head to Your Heart**

Next time you step into your garden let it become a yoga practice. *Surrender your head to your heart.*

Try to focus just a little less on what needs to be accomplished and more on observing what is happening around you. Let observation nourish your soul as well as benefit your plants.

Take the time you need to adequately prepare the soil, to be sure that you are placing a plant where it will thrive, even if it means not doing as much or not planting as many things this year.

The rewards to you and your garden will be much longer lasting.

The meaning of photosynthesis is *to put together with light.*

When I read those words I feel the yogini in me connect to the gardener in me.

Take a moment to let yourself be present to what is happening inside and out.

### **Breathe deeply.**

Don't worry about last year's garden and try not to expect anything from this year's garden. Stay in the grace of the present moment.

## Warming Up

As in gardening generally, the place to start your yoga practice is at ground level. Grounding is the first step to a productive yoga posture.

Maybe all you'll do today is walk outside, stopping to listen, observe and enjoy. Great gardeners are the ones who really look at their plants.

Each one is a living organism with different needs, like ourselves.

It takes concentration to notice what is happening in your own body or in the many facets of plant health.

Walking has its own warm-up built in. The rest of gardening is another matter. We may not think of tending to the garden as exercise. . .until we're done.

As the aches and pains of an unconditioned body begin to set in, we remember that gardening is as much about using the body as it is a reflection on or cultivation of beautiful plants.

If you have the time, and have identified something that needs to be done, then prepare the body for movement.

### **Begin with a Centering, Relaxing, Elongating Exercise**

You could start sitting in a straight-back chair or standing. Plant both feet on the ground and rest your hands on your thighs or at your sides. Lengthen the spine upward toward the sun. Notice and respect the curves of the back.

The objective is to feel a gentle upward lengthening even as the lower half of the body reaches deeply earthward. Relax shoulders and face. Sit for a minute, breathing slowly and deeply.

Shake off whatever else has been going on in your day and focus your attention on the present. Practice being fully present to the here and now, at home in the body, aware of the earth beneath your feet and the sky above your head.

Then you can begin to build from the ground up:

#### ✓ **Feet First**

Get the limbs moving and energized.

Just like any athlete, we need to get the blood moving first. Wiggle hands,

arms, feet and legs.

Shake out your hands. Move all the fingers by making a fist, then spreading the fingers wide. Shake your arms. Circle your ankles, come up onto the toes and then rock back onto your heels.

Notice the way that this mild movement can make you feel warmer. Do a mental scan of your body, listening and noticing whether there is anything else you might do to loosen up.

### ✓ **Working from the Core**

You can identify the core muscles by pulling up through the pelvic floor (women know this exercise as the Kegel exercise).

Then draw the naval toward the spine, pulling in the abdominal muscles. Pull up and in simultaneously to engage the core. Practice holding and leading movement from your core. Always come back to the center.

Strengthening the core is critical to being able to safely do gentle back bends as you garden.

All the bending over, forward bending, needs to be regularly counteracted with gentle back bends.

### ✓ **Shoulder & Neck Stretches**

Bring your hands to your waist and lift the right elbow up toward the right ear.

Roll the right arm back, releasing the right shoulder blade. Do this a couple of times. Repeat on the left side.

Drop your chin to your chest and SLOWLY roll the chin to the right, bringing right ear toward the right shoulder.

Then roll the chin slowly back along the chest and over to the left side.

For a deeper neck stretch bring the arm up and rest it on top of the head (without pulling on the head). Bring your hands to the back of the neck and support your head as you drop the head back slightly.

Bring your hands together over your head, fingers interlaced, palms facing up to the sky. Then gently let the arms drop backward, while the chin comes toward the chest.

Clasp your hands behind your back, fingers interlaced and palms pressed together.

See if you can lift your arms up the back gently, feeling the squeeze between the shoulder blades.

#### ✓ **Special Attention to the Hands**

If you know you will be using your hands and wrists a lot, you should regularly stretch out the hands by opening the fingers wide, followed by making a fist.

As you close the hand, roll each finger toward the palm, starting with the pinkie finger.

Another good stretch for thumb joint and wrists: Close fingers over each thumb and bend elbows at a right angle, palms facing each other. Gently nod the clenched fists up and down.

#### ✓ **Stretches for the Back & Legs**

While working in the garden you will be stooping and bending over often. The back and legs will need to be warmed up and strengthened.

Some good warm-ups for back and legs include gentle lunges, either with the back leg straight (runner's stretch) or resting on the ground (low lunge).

Starting from table position, on hands and knees, round the back up and drop the chin and tail bone.

Alternate by lifting the tail bone and arching the back, chin and head rolling up last. These are cat and dog stretches.

Finally, try a few gentle squats. Start standing tall and rest your hands on your thighs as you slowly bend your knees.

You should be always able to look down and see your toes, trying to keep the knees over the arch of the feet.

If you feel strong you can then lift one hand out in front of you, followed by the other arm extended. This is known as the Standing Squat posture or *utkatasana*.

#### ✓ **Stretches and Counter-Stretches - While you Work**

Remain conscious of how you are positioning your body as you work.

An occasional body scan and regular deep breathing can help you find proper alignment.

Consciously adjust your position so you are more comfortable.

Anytime your back is bothering you, practice the cat and dog stretches described above.

#### ✓ **Relaxation**

Any yoga practice should include relaxation and your mindful gardening is no exception.

Don't neglect to take the time you need to soak up the pleasures and images of your garden as you complete your work for the day.

Let your garden nourish you as you have tended to its needs.

## **Final Thoughts**

Any time you think of it, stand quietly contemplating and breathing in the sights, sounds and smells all around you.

Let your senses become active as your body stops, relaxes, and heals.