

# 15 Minutes a Day To Keep Gardening Aches Away

DR. RICHARD L. BITNER HAS TURNED HIS COLUMN OVER TO DEB NEHLIG THIS MONTH. DEB IS A PILATES METHOD ALLIANCE CERTIFIED TEACHER AS WELL AS A REGISTERED YOGA TEACHER (200 HOURS). SHE'S HERE TO HELP YOU PREPARE FOR THE PHYSICAL DEMANDS OF THE GARDENING SEASON BY USING AN EVERYDAY ROUTINE OF YOGA AND PILATES.

BY DEB NEHLIG | PHOTOS BY NICK GOULD

**A**S THE EARTH WARMS UP, gardeners are making plans, buying seeds, daydreaming of summer bounty and readying themselves to get dirt under their nails. Oftentimes, the one thing missing from their to-do lists is preparing themselves physically for the demands that gardening places on the body.

Every year, people in the Northeast are seen in doctors' offices for gardening overuse injuries or back pain due to weekend gardening heroics after a somewhat sedentary winter. Such injuries are somewhat expected; after all, gardening requires bending, digging, pulling, lifting and twisting.

There is a way to wisely approach spring gardening weekends without suffering from sore knees and a tight back in the days that follow. Taking time to prepare your body for the physical demands of the season will lead to an enjoyable summer in the garden. As you are planning changes to your perennial beds and

sharpening your tools, take some time to do some preliminary strengthening and stretching. Your knees, back, hips, shoulders and arms will thank you for it.

IN THE EARLY '90S, I was an aerobics teacher who enjoyed gardening on the weekends. Thinking I was in great shape, I was surprised by the fact that my body felt tired and sore after spending a few hours in the garden. I began to research how I could help my back and stumbled across Pilates. I began following a VHS tape, as that was all that was available in rural Illinois, and within weeks I noticed a difference. What started as an experiment with my own body, led to a change, as I began to focus my teaching on Pilates and yoga. Over the years, numerous students have told me that they notice a difference in how their bodies respond to the demands of gardening and yard work thanks to yoga and Pilates.



Deb teaches Mermaid by utilizing the Pilates chairs in the Pilates equipment studio located inside Float Yoga.

Credit goes to Joseph H. Pilates, who developed the Pilates method over a period of 60 years. Using the mat work and equipment he invented, he was a pioneer in functional, full-body exercise.

Pilates can not only improve posture and balance, but it can also strengthen and tone. It increases flexibility, muscle control and lung capacity. Well known to the New York dance and performing arts community for decades, the method found more converts and wider interest when a 2000 lawsuit released the right to the name and brought Pilates into the fitness community. Pilates is perfect for anyone – from beginner to the advanced athlete – who is looking to cross-train.

ALL HEALTHY MOVEMENT is good. But, what makes yoga and Pilates especially good choices to complement gardening? Let's consider the basic movements involved in an average day in the garden.

**BENDING FORWARD AND KNEELING DOWN** Almost everyone has seen a poster or read an article about the proper form for bending and lifting to protect your back. Bend the knees, keep your back straight, and use your leg muscles and not your lower back to lift the weight. Squatting down requires more than leg strength to protect the knees. The ankles and hips need to be agile and flexible. Pilates exercises and yoga poses provide opportunities to move the ankle and hip joint through a healthy range of movement.

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**BELOW CENTER:** Students balance on the chair in the challenging teaser pose. The Pilates Cadillac is seen in the background.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Sharing a laugh mid-Up and Down Front on the chair.



Brad Nicarry (studio owner and teacher) leads a floating yoga class inside the yoga room where traditional yoga, floating yoga, and mat Pilates classes are held.



# Deb's Top Exercises from Pilates and Yoga to Prepare for your Gardening Journey

## Warm-up Exercises to Move the Spine in 6 Directions



### Cat and Dog

Start in tabletop position with shoulders over the wrists and hips over the knees. Inhale and lift head and tail, allowing the front of the torso to stretch open. Exhale round tail and head toward each other stretching the back. Move back and forth smoothly 8-10 breaths, creating an undulating movement from head to tail.

TO SEE MORE EXERCISES, VISIT [LANCASTERCOUNTYMAG.COM](http://LANCASTERCOUNTYMAG.COM)

EXERCISE PHOTOS BY DR. RICHARD L. BITNER



### Knee Sways

Lie on your back with feet and knees together. Arms wide for support. Inhale and bring knees to one side, keeping feet and knees together. The knees do not need to touch the floor. Exhale and return to center. Feel a gentle stretch in the low back and outer hip. Continue for 8-10 breaths alternating sides; notice how each vertebra rolls off and back on to the floor.

## Reset at the End of a Long Day



### Kneeling Lunge with Twist

Step one leg forward, keeping the knee over the ankle. Bring both hips forward, keeping the spine long. Hold for 2-3 breaths. Keeping the spine long, rotate the front ribs towards the inside of front leg. Hold for 2-3 breaths. Repeat on the other side.

# to Prepare for your Gardening Journey

A special Yoga and Pilates Movement for Gardeners is scheduled for May 20th, 1:30-3 pm at Float Yoga in Lititz. The class will cover the movements discussed in this article (and more) and allow time for questions. To register, visit [Float-yoga.com](http://Float-yoga.com). Questions? Contact Deb at 717-471-6868 or through [thedancingfrog.com](http://thedancingfrog.com).

## Strengthening Exercises



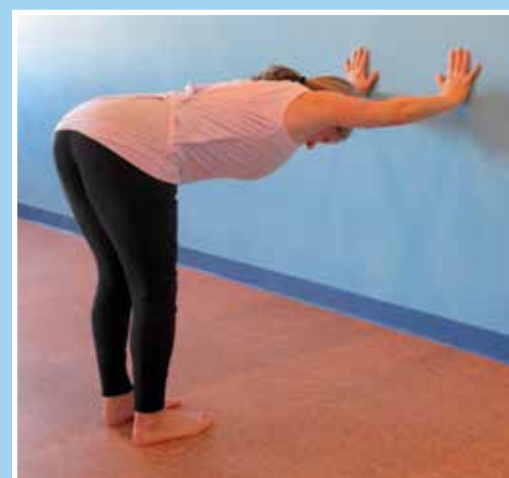
### Swan (Cobra) Prep

Lie facedown, elbows bent near side. Press tops of feet and hipbones gently into the floor. Inhale, elongate the spine and lift the head and shoulders. Exhale, lower torso. Do not strain or push strongly with the hands. Notice an engagement of the upper back muscles and the back of the legs. Complete 3-5 breaths.



### Bridge

Lie on back, knees bent, heels in line with the sitting bones. Arms alongside body. Palms facing down. Exhale, press down with the feet and lift the pelvis up. Bear the weight of the body on the feet, arms, upper back and back of head. (Keep weight off the neck). Take 2-3 breaths while holding the pose. Exhale, release body back to the floor. Do the whole series 2-3 times. To complete, bring the knees toward the chest.



### Down Dog at the Wall

Place the hands on a wall at hip height. Walk back until your back is straight, forming a line parallel to the floor and a right angle at the hip joint. Soften your knees. Fine tune the stretch for your body with a focus on lengthening the hips away from the hands. Hold for 5 breaths.

**PULLING AND PUSHING** If all the muscles are working synergistically, no one particular muscle has to do it all. Bending forward to pull weeds or push a wheelbarrow can be helped with strong arms and legs. The key is utilizing the strength of the torso (core) to initiate movement. Variations of the plank pose taught in yoga and Pilates train the core, legs and arms together.

**BALANCE** The ground is uneven and you can be caught unaware when you are mindlessly carrying bags of peat. Strong outer hip muscles support our balance. Standing balance poses in yoga – like tree or chair poses – work to develop the nervous system and strengthen the side hip muscles.

**MIND/BODY AWARENESS** One of the amazing benefits of yoga and Pilates is the union of movement with breath, concentration and noticing how you feel. “No pain no gain” is *not* a guiding principle. Bring this practice of awareness to your weekend gardening projects and

perhaps you will notice how your body feels before you have done too much for the day.

## Getting Started

Perhaps you are new to yoga and Pilates and are not sure where to start. Experiment with my top exercises. Remember that all movement should feel good. I suggest you never stretch to the full end range and always back off if you feel anything sharp in the joint itself. A little goes a long way.

Consistency is more important than the amount of time you spend. Don't worry if your schedule doesn't permit a long routine. Joe Pilates recommended practicing his method at least four times a week. I personally notice a great benefit when I do a minimum of 20 minutes a day.

If you are already an avid mover, adding this simple stretching routine can rapidly reap perceptible benefits. If you are looking for more instruction and motivation, seek out a qualified teacher, maybe starting with a gentle-

or beginner-level yoga class. Some may choose to do private lessons with a Pilates teacher on the Pilates equipment for more personalized instruction.

Or, seek out a beautiful flat spot in your garden that would be perfect for 15 minutes of movement where you can enjoy the fruits of your labor. Happy digging!

LOOKING FOR A BOOK with more in-depth information on yoga or Pilates? Two of my favorites: *Kripalu Yoga A Guide to Practice On and Off the Mat* by Richard Faulds and *The Everything Pilates Book* by Amy Taylor Alpers and Rachel Taylor Segel.

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*If you have any physical needs, conditions or injuries that might prohibit you from performing the described exercises, please consult your physician before beginning. This information is not intended to replace the advice of your physician or physical therapist. Lancaster County magazine, Deb Nehlig, and Dr. Bitner disclaim any liability for any exercise decisions you make based on this Gardening Journey.*