In order to address the question of gardening during Shemitta, we will examine Shemitta from the sources.

**Labors that are forbidden by Torah law**

“Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the L-rd: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land” (Vayikra 25:3–5).

These verses contain four labors that are forbidden to perform during the Shemitta year: sowing, pruning, reaping and gathering.

- **Sowing** is the burying of seeds in the soil so that crops can grow from them. The prohibition against sowing applies even to plants that do not bear fruit.
- **Planting** a seedling or a tree is also forbidden, but the Poskim disagree whether this is forbidden by Torah law or only by rabbinic decree.
- **Pruning** is the removal of branches from a tree to stimulate growth. Some authorities maintain that the Torah prohibition applies only to grapevines, while the pruning of other trees is only forbidden by rabbinic decree. According to this view, the Torah only prohibits pruning that stimulates the growth of the fruit, as is the case with a grapevine.
- **Plowing** is forbidden during Shemitta, but there is a disagreement as to whether all plowing is forbidden by Torah law (which is the prevailing opinion) or only plowing that accompanies the planting process.

When it comes to harvesting the produce, by Torah law, it is forbidden to gather (picking fruits and other perennial crops) or reap (harvesting vegetables and other annual crops). This prohibition stems from the fact that it is forbidden to demonstrate ownership over the land. It follows that one is permitted to harvest a small, non-commercial quantity of produce that will suffice for one’s family for several days. Even in such a case, however, it is preferable that one harvest in an altered manner (e.g., if produce is usually harvested with a tool, one should harvest instead by hand).

This prohibition of harvesting produce only applies to produce that has Shemitta sanctity. Therefore, it is permissible to pick fruit during the first few months of Shemitta in the ordinary manner (since it does not have Shemitta sanctity). On the other hand, fruit that has Shemitta sanctity must be picked in an altered manner, even during the eighth year, even though planting is already permissible. The Shemitta sanctity of vegetables is determined by the date on which they are picked, and therefore, from the very beginning of the Shemitta year, they may not be picked in the ordinary manner, but only in small quantities (as explained in the preceding paragraph), until the next Rosh Hashanah.

**Labors that are forbidden by rabbinic decree**

In addition to the labors forbidden by Torah law during the Shemitta year, it is prohibited by rabbinic decree to perform any actions that enhance the growth of a plant.
Therefore, it is forbidden to water, to remove weeds (with their roots), to cut weeds (without removing their roots), to fertilize, to remove stones (to prepare the land for planting), and to perform any other such activities.

One may perform labors generally forbidden by rabbinic decree during Shemitta only when failure to do so will cause the plants to die. In other words, labors forbidden by rabbinic decree are permitted during the Shemitta year when performed to preserve that which already exists, so that it does not die, but not when performed to strengthen and develop that which is growing in the field.

Must I neglect my garden?

A Jew once told me: “I do not touch my garden at all in the year of the Shemitta. The garden is wild, weeds are growing everywhere, the grass is being destroyed, and I am happy. My garden is resting during Shemitta!”

A different Jew once told me: “I try not to perform even permitted labors in the garden during Shemitta.” When I asked him why, the man explained: “My neighbors are not observant of Torah and mitzvot. If they observe me taking care of the garden, they may get confused and think that it is permissible to perform forbidden labors as well.”

To both of these well meaning Jews, I responded: If the halachah permits certain labors in the garden, there is no point in not doing them, thereby causing the garden to look neglected. On the contrary, such an approach shows that halachah does not align with reality. Such an approach indicates that halachah requires a reality of neglect, an existence of destruction and loss. But this is not the case! Indeed, the laws of Shemitta are not simple, and without question, some things are prohibited during Shemitta. However, halachah does not forbid maintaining what exists, halachah does not declare that during Shemitta, we must destroy our gardens!

The fear of “lest my neighbor think that it is permissible to perform forbidden agricultural labors” is marginal compared to the statement that “halachah contradicts reality!”

We must observe the laws of Shemitta, including both the Torah law and rabbinic prohibitions of Shemitta. But at the same time, we must also show our neighbors that observing Shemitta does not require us to destroy our gardens! That even during a year in which “the land rests” (Vayikra 25:2), the land of Israel continues to live and exist. Shemitta does not cause destruction of the land, but rather the opposite; Shemitta leads to the sanctity of the land! Shemitta brings a year in which we neither create nor renew, but preserve the existing and resting land and enjoy its flourishing holiness!