

Tool Care

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Tools with good blades and design are a pleasure to hold and to use—and typically come with higher price tags. Many gardeners take a long view and invest in good-quality tools that can be passed on to future gardeners. Such tools help gardeners to tackle the work of each season. These items often become friends. They require regular care to hold their edges, to condition wooden handles, and to retain their value. Tools need to be sharp, clean, and sterile so that they do not accidentally spread disease. Tools should be occasionally oiled and stored in accessible locations.

Sharpening

Hoes, chisels, shears, scissors, knives, loppers, pruners, and shovels—these tools all require occasional sharpening. Dull blades can be revived with files or whetstones. Protective eyewear helps to prevent injuries caused by flying bits of metal. Heavy gloves help to prevent cuts from sharp slivers of steel. If you're not one to do the job yourself, many garden centers offer tool and knife sharpening as a paid service.

Cleaning and sterilizing

Clean tools work better and last longer. Plant diseases can be spread by dirty and contaminated pruning tools. Wash soil from tools with a garden hose and scrub with a wire or stiff-bristle brush. Dip tools into a diluted solution of household bleach, using *ten parts water to one part bleach*. Disinfecting pruning tools is especially important when trimming plants in more than one location. With a garden hose, rinse soil from digging tools after each use. Remove plant debris and sap from cutting surfaces. Rinse the clean tools and dry them thoroughly.

Oiling

Clean, dry tools need to be lubricated and protected from oxidation to prevent rust. Linseed oil and camellia oil are excellent protectants for metal and wood tools. Coat all metal surfaces with the oil and let it soak in for a few minutes. Give attention to moving parts and inner springs. Wipe away excess oil. Gardeners that live in drier climates should oil handles more frequently to prevent them from drying out and cracking. Rust on any tool is the result of oxygen and water reacting with the metal. The application of oil creates a barrier that reduces metal contact with oxygen and water.

Storing Tools

After cleaning, return tools to locations where they will stay dry and remain rust-free. Small spades and trowels can be kept in a bin or large pot filled with sand soaked with linseed oil. This mixture helps to keep metal well-conditioned. Larger tools are best hung in a dry, ventilated area. A pegboard will keep tools organized and easy to reach.

A heavy-duty utility bin can function like a giant pencil holder to contain long tools in the handles-down position. Do not lean tools against a garage wall touching the floor. Pavement can dull blades and hold moisture that may promote rust. Garden tools—wooden handles in particular—will last longer if they are given some care every so often.

The author has received training through Colorado State University Extension's Master Gardener program and is a Master Gardener volunteer for Larimer County.

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