

The Tool Shed



By Mary Mason and Pat Davis, URI Master Gardeners

Spring Garden Tool Care

Spring will be here in 21 days! Are you ready for those special gift days when you can get out in the yard to remove the leaves, fallen branches, and New England's famous wind blown trash? Are your tools ready to take on another season of hard work? Alas, you still have time to prepare your tools for this spring. I'm thinking there are a few cold rainy days and evenings to come when you can cover the floor with an old blanket, pour a cup of tea, and get to work. Here are a few helpful hints on how to prepare your tools for another joyous gardening season.

Routine Care: Dove it (i.e., wash, clean, and moisturize)

- Because it's cold outside, use a tall plastic container (kitchen waste basket or stand up wrapping paper holder) to carry the tools into a mud room or bath tub. Brush the dirt off. Rinse it off with water. Scour with a rag or pad if needed.
- Disinfect the tool. Some gardeners use a 10% bleach solution for this but it can cause white crystals to form on forged-alloy metals. To prevent this, try a final water rinse or use Lysol, rubbing alcohol, or antiseptic mouthwash to clean the tool. Dry the tools as best you can and leave them in a warm space for a while to dry off well.
- Oil the tool. You want to keep metal parts from rusting, mechanisms moving smoothly, and wooden handles from deteriorating. The type of oil is a personal choice but motor oil is a good choice for the metal pieces. Using a plastic container of personal wipes with either oil or disinfecting solution added to it is an easy way to keep tool care a quick project rather than a painful chore.

Special and Periodic Care (Best done on a warm sunny day with a cold drink.)

Removing rust: There are times when a shovel or spade gets rusty. To ensure the tool does not get permanently damaged, clean the rust off as soon as you find it. Sandpaper, steel wool, a scouring pad, or a wire brush can do the trick. There are also Sandflex Hand Blocks, a product that is a pliable block of an abrasive that is used like an eraser to remove rust from metal. They are available from some catalogues and hardware and woodworking stores.

Removing pine and spruce gum: Cra-z Soap is a great product for removing the gum from tools, hands, and clothes. Acetone can also be used but it dries hands quite a bit.

Care of the wooden handles: Boiled linseed oil is the best for wooden handles. If it is a new tool, lightly sand the wood before rubbing in the oil.

Sharpening tools: To sharpen a blade, examine it closely to see the original angle of the blade. The goal is to duplicate that angle in the sharpening process. The type of sharpening tool used depends on the tool to be sharpened and personal choice. A sharpening stone wheel, a standard single cut flat file, a water or oil honing stone, a monocrystalline diamond sharpener, or a simple, small pocket-size sharpening stone will all do a fine job. The file, wheel, or honing stone are good for a periodic, once or twice a season honing, but the small stone or pocket-size diamond stone sharpener is convenient, effective, and portable.

A Few Other Tool Tips

- Make an oil and sand slurry with about a pint of motor oil to 20 pounds of course sand. Clean your tool then insert in into the slurry a few times. Wipe off the excess sand and oil.
- Make oil wipes by using baby wipes with about 2-3 ounces of motor oil added to the container. Make sure the old label is removed and the container is well labeled that a change has been made to the contents.
- Make disinfectant wipes by adding Lysol, alcohol, bleach, or a disinfectant of your choice to a container of baby wipes. Make sure the old label is removed and the container is well labeled that a change has been made to the contents.
- Make padded hand grips for rakes or shovels by using foam pipe insulation. Use the split type and apply contact cement to the handle of the tool to hold it in place.
- Paint the handle of small hand tools a bright color, other than green, to ensure they do not get lost in the lawn or garden.
- Use a mail box in the garden to hold small tools or plant ties. Whenever you are in the garden you have what you need for quick jobs.
- Try an old golf bag to hold long handle tools and accessories.
- Keep an old pair of rubber boots out in the garden, hung upside down on a stake or pole. You won't get your shoes dirty when you stop to do "just one thing".

All your tools should be cleaned and oiled after use. The trick is to make it easy and to get in the habit of actually doing it.