

# The Tool Shed



By Mary Mason and Pat Davis, URI Master Gardeners

## The Most Important Garden Tool – Your Hands

Gardeners' most used and abused tools are their hands. Our hands bring us closer to the earth as we feel the moisture and texture of the soil, examine the intricacies of a flower, or handpick insects off plants. However, in order to protect our precious sense of touch we often must resort to wearing gloves to prevent blisters and injuries from thorns and splinters, to avoid contact with soil-borne pathogens, or protect from poison ivy.

### Gloves

Some gardeners could spend a lifetime looking for just the right pair of gloves. The truth is that there are so many gardening tasks, there is not one single style of gloves suitable for all tasks. The key to choosing any type of glove is **comfort**. Most gloves are designed for specific tasks and the material they are made from is chosen to enhance the design. Cotton gloves are reasonably priced, easy to find, and work well for general duty gardening. Rubber or latex dipped gardening gloves are useful when working in the cold mud of spring and around water. Some are thorn resistant but not thorn-proof. Nitrile gloves are good substitutes when someone has a latex allergy. Leather gloves, however, should be an essential addition to your glove collection. They can be costly but are well worth the investment. The leather should not bite or bind anywhere on the hand or fingers and it should feel smooth on the hand. The gauntlet style glove has a cuff that is made to come over the wrist and protect the arm as well as the hand. It works well for pruning, clearing and carrying wood, and working with thorny plants.

### Ergonomics

Ergonomics is the study of the relationship between people and the tools they use. The goal is to design tools that work with body mechanics and remove sources of muscular stress and fatigue. Gardeners' use of their hands predisposes them to repetitive motion injuries, cumulative trauma disorders and other physical problems. Older tools, especially pruning tools, have designs that fight the natural movement of the hand and can cause strain of the muscles and tendons. Gardeners need to assess the best way to prevent the potential for chronic, painful injuries such as tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive-motion disorder, or arthritis. Some hints include:

- Use ergonomically designed gardening hand tools like tools with right-angle handles for less effort and no wrist action.
- Use large circumference handles. This causes less strain in holding and using the tool. The ideal diameter for a power grip is 1¼ to 1½ inches.
- Make padded hand grips for rakes and shovels by using foam pipe insulation. Use the split type and apply contact cement to the tool handle to hold it in place.
- Get a tool that fits your hand. For example, if you get pruners that cause you to overextend your fingers, your hand will tire quickly and easily. Switch hands frequently to avoid overexertion.

### Poison Ivy and Tetanus

**All** parts of poison ivy are poisonous, whether the plant is dead or alive. The oil from poison ivy will stay on your gloves and clothes and shoes so take precautions to clean your clothing after working in a spot where poison ivy is growing. According to Barbara Damrosch, "Many people think their rash is spreading when they are just reinfesting themselves every day by putting on contaminated gloves or clothing." A product called **Tecnu** is an excellent cleanser that neutralizes poison ivy/oak oil on skin and clothing. It is an over-the-counter solution that can be found in your local drugstore.

The spores of *Clostridium tetani* can live for years in animal feces and soil. The toxin from this bacterium causes tetanus if it infects the body through a dirty or deep wound. If you work in soil or compost where there is the potential for animal feces it is essential that you wear gloves. But more essential than gloves is to ensure your tetanus immunization is up to date. Adults need tetanus boosters every **10 years** to decrease their chance of getting tetanus. If you are unsure of when your last tetanus shot was, and you have experienced a puncture type wound, ask the physician for a tetanus booster anyway.

Happy gardening.

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