

The Right Hand Tools Make Gardening Easy



Digging, weeding, raking and pruning--gardening chores don't have to be back breaking and time consuming when you have the right tools and know how to use them. In this world of noisy, smoke belching power equipment and machinery, it's good to know that you can still get many gardening jobs done without disturbing neighbors or the environment and with the benefit of getting some moderate exercise.

Why are hand tools important?

Hand tools are relatively inexpensive, long lasting, simple to operate, don't require fuel or extensive maintenance, and can be fun to use! When properly chosen for the task, garden work is easy with the right tool. Garden tools are extensions of your hands and body. Well-designed tools use principles of physics such as leverage and kinetic energy to get the job done with a minimum of exertion and strain.

Today there's a mind-boggling assortment of



Tools can be fun!

gardening tools available to home gardeners, but there are only a few basic types that every gardener really needs to get things done. Many tools are merely variations of the basics and include shovels, spades, rakes, hoes, and pruning tools.

Five tool buying tips

Here are a few important points to keep in mind when selecting garden tools:

1. Make sure it's the right tool for the task at hand.
2. Always choose the best quality for the price you can afford.
3. A tool must feel comfortable and be the right size for the user. Longer handles, 48 inches or longer, for certain tools, especially on digging tools and rakes provide the best leverage and minimize exertion. Longer handled tools keep your back in an upright position, reducing stress on lower back muscles; however, there are situation where a shorter handle is the right choice, so when in doubt refer back to Tip #1.

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4. Consider a tool's weight--new lighter materials make tools easier to handle.
5. Cushion covered grips and handles add comfort and help avoid calluses and blisters.

Buying quality tools is important

With garden tools you get what you pay for, so don't let a cheap price fool you. Spending a little extra now on a rake with a longer handle or a shovel with a more comfortable grip is money well spent and better than paying later with sore muscles, blisters and exhaustion. A well chosen, good quality garden tool will last a lifetime and will be a pleasure to use for years to come.



Take care of tools and they will last a lifetime!

Tools every gardener should know

Garden tools are primarily used for digging, raking, weeding, cultivating and pruning. Here are some essential tools that every home gardener should be familiar with:

Digging tools

Shovel. Perhaps the most familiar gardening tool. Primarily used for digging holes or moving loose soil or other material. Round pointed blades are used for digging, square blades for scooping. Handles vary in length from 26 to 30 inches with "D" grip handles for use in tight quarters where maneuvering is limited or where control is important. Longer handles (48" or more) without the "D" grip at the end are better for use when heavy lifting or prying is essential.



Trowel. A small, hand-held version of a shovel used for digging holes and planting seedlings, small perennials, and bulbs. Trowels with narrower blades are called "transplanters."

Dibble. Used for making lots of small holes quickly when planting seedlings and bulbs. Consists of a wide, pointed dowel with a handle.

Spade. Similar to a shovel but with a flat rectangular blade. Used for digging planting holes, trenches, turning soil and digging out plants for transplanting. Spades are designed for cutting through roots and compacted soils. Short handles (26"-30") with "D" style grips are most commonly used for better control. Cutting edge should be kept sharp with the use of a metal file, whetstone or emery wheel. Border spades are smaller, lighter versions preferred for use in flowerbeds and narrow borders and by children and older gardeners.

Digging Fork. Similar to a spade but instead of a blade, there's a 7 to 8 inch wide head with four 12 inch long, stiff, steel tines and a short (26"-30") handle with a "D" style grip although long handle versions are

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available too. Used to turn soil over, lift bulbs and perennials, divide perennials, harvest root crops and for cultivation. Also called a spading fork and not to be confused with a pitchfork which is very different and primarily used for moving around straw and hay down on the farm.



Rakes

Lawn Rake. Once an indispensable garden tool before power leaf blowers, lawn rakes are still valued by home gardeners for cleaning up leaves, twigs, grass clippings and debris. Rake head widths vary from 8 inches wide (considered a “shrub rake” for getting into tight spots) to over 30 inches wide. Plastic or rubber tines, which won't rust, are flexible and gentle and will not pull out shallow rooted plants or grass. Lawn rakes are also made with steel or bamboo tines. Both are very durable and have a “stiffer” feel than rubber or plastic. Some folks prefer the “natural springy” feel of bamboo. It's all a matter of personal preference; all will get the job done just fine. Longer (48” or more) handles are best to minimize effort and reduce back strain.

Garden Rake. Used for breaking up large clumps of soil, removing stones, rocks, twigs, debris and leveling freshly turned lawn or garden soil for seeding or planting. This rake consists of a 12 to 18 inch or longer

row of solid metal tines that are several inches long and a long (48” or longer) handle. Two head styles are common, the flathead and bowhead. The flathead is made from a single piece of flat steel, the bowhead is similar but is attached to the handle by two steel rods that run from the outer ends of the head and are gathered toward the middle of the head and inserted into the handle. Both styles achieve the same result.

Cultivator.

Consisting of a head with three or more prongs or elongated tines and a long (40”-48”) handle, cultivators are used for loosening and aerating soil, working in fertilizer or organic matter into the soil.



Also used for weeding close to and around established plant. It can also be used to rake out leaves and weeds from tight spots and in between plants. Smaller, short handled versions are available too.

Weeding

Weeding Hoe. Long (40”-48”) and shorter handle versions of this garden workhorse make weeding a snap. There are many variations available. A common style has a head with a flat metal blade, attached at a 45 to 70 degree angle to the handle. The flat edge of the blade is sharpened for cutting. The blade is placed at ground level on the far side of the weed so when it is pulled toward you and slightly below the surface of the soil it cuts or severs the top of the weed from its roots. Other styles, called stirrup hoes, scuffle hoes, weed slicers and “swoes” have blades that have two or more sharp edges and are pushed and pulled, back and forth slightly below the soil surface too, maximizing the use of movement and energy.

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No gardener should ever be without good pruning shears

Cutting

Pruning Shears. No gardener should ever be without these. Also called pruners, snips or secateurs, pruning shears are used to cut small branches and twigs (1/2 - 3/4" wide) from woody plants. Smaller versions are used for pruning and "deadheading" spent flowers on both woody and herbaceous (soft-stemmed) plants and houseplants. There are three basic cutting blade types: anvil, curved bypass and straight bypass. Anvil shears have a sharp, straight cutting blade on one side and a wider, flat surface blade on the other side. Curved bypass shears have two slightly curved blades that pass each other like a pair of scissors while straight bypass shears do the same but the blades are straight, not curved. Cutting is achieved by squeezing the two handles together. Although most professionals and experienced gardeners tend to prefer curved bypass type shears claiming that it cuts easier and makes a "cleaner" cut, anvil shears will cut cleanly too if the blade is made of high quality steel and kept sharp. Curved blades keep the branch from slipping and bypass blades can cut closer to the branch or trunk.

Loppers. Used for pruning branches that are thicker and tougher than those that can be cut with pruning shears (3/4-1 1/2" wide) and are also known as lopping shears. The cutting blades come in anvil and curved bypass types and are slightly larger than pruning shears, having longer (18" or longer, sometime telescoping) and heavier handles made of wood or metal.

Hedge Shear. Large scissor-like, 10 to 12 inch long, straight bypass type blades used to trim the soft growth of hedges and branches up to 1/2 inch thick. Handles are thick, 12 inches or more long and made of wood or metal. Also known as hand shears.

Pruning Saw. For cutting branches that are 1 1/2 to 10 inches wide. Steel blades, can be 10 or more inches long, most common length is 14"-18" with very sharp, large triangular teeth specially designed for cutting "green" wood. Blades can come single or double sided. Some types have a blade that folds into the handle while others are "rigid" or "fixed" in place to a "D" shaped grip or "pistol-handle" grip. Cutting action is achieved by firmly pushing and pulling the saw back and forth on the branch. Also known as a tree saw.

Five tips for safe, effective cutting tool use

1. Keep cutting tool blades sharp and clean, free from sap buildup.
2. Oil pivot areas and other moving parts frequently.
3. For least resistance, cut at a diagonal to the grain.
4. When using pruning shears, loppers or hedge shears, avoid the urge to force or twist the tool while cutting. This could damage the blade or otherwise ruin the tool. Go for a larger tool or pruning saw.

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5. Avoid losing or misplacing pruning shears by using a scabbard, which is a pruning shear holder made of leather, plastic or fabric that clips on or loops through a belt around you waist.

Caring for your tools

To make sure your garden tools perform well and last a lifetime, keep them clean and store them properly after every use. Clean and remove soil and plant debris with a rough cloth or piece of burlap. For added protection from corrosion, wipe metal parts with an oily rag (motor oil works fine). If you're really feeling ambitious, wooden handles can be varnished or painted to add years to their life.

If you tend to be generous and lend your tools to family and friends, a unique color or paint job or just inscribing your name on your tools will usually ensure they come back to you, sooner or later. At least they'll be easy to identify. Store tools away in a dry shed or garage. Never leave tools out in the rain or snow. Periodically have pruning tools, spades and weeding hoes sharpened and oiled. This will make them easier to use and with less exertion.

If you already have some garden tools and they're in bad shape, clean and oil them or determine whether or not they should be replaced. To remove corrosion on metal parts, use a wire brush or steel wool soaked in motor oil. Brush or rub vigorously, then wipe down with an oily rag. Before long they'll be good as new!

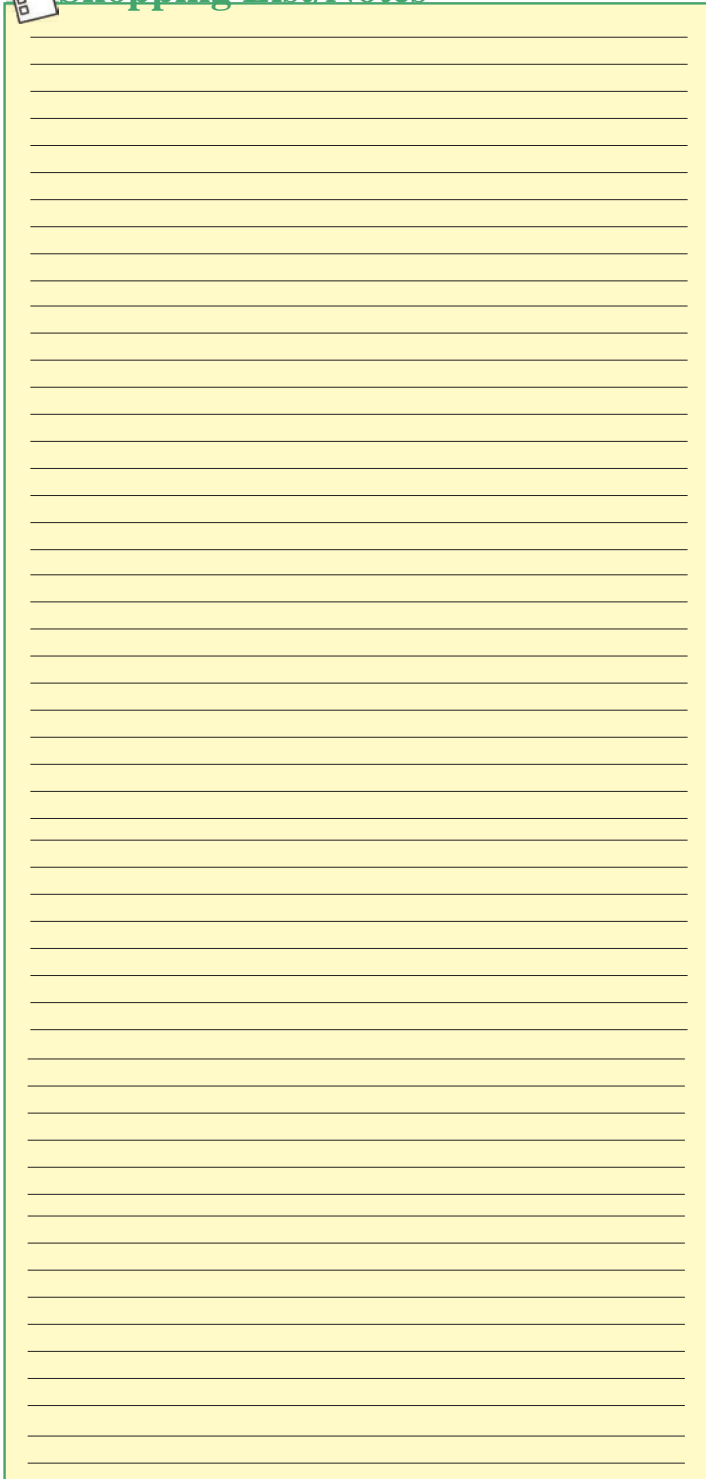
About Your Expert

Donna Moramarco,
Horticulturist, a.k.a.

Donna ^{In}the Garden

PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco (a.k.a. "Donna in the Garden") has been helping gardeners solve problems and achieve their dreams for over two decades. Donna has degrees in horticulture and education plus over 20 years as a Cornell University extension horticulturist.

Shopping List/Notes



A large yellow rectangular area with a green border, containing horizontal lines for writing a shopping list or notes. A small icon of a notepad with a pencil is located at the top left of this area.