

Proper Maintenance Extends Lifespan, Saves Money On Garden Tools

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URBANA – One of the pricier expenditures for home gardeners is quality hand tools. High quality tools will last longer, but this does mean the tools — whether shovels, rakes, pruners, or hand trowels — cost more.

“Buy the best you can afford. Take care of your tools, and they will take care of you,” says Mary Fischer, University of Illinois Extension horticulture educator serving [Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper Counties](#). “This takes time and effort, but can extend the life of your investment.”

With winter coming up, make sure to clean, oil, and sharpen tools before storing them for the season.

The first step to tool maintenance is proper storage. Do not leave tools outside where they can absorb moisture from wet grass and dew. Instead, store tools off the ground and away from potential moisture, such as in a shed, barn, or garage.

Long-handled tools can be stored conveniently on hanging racks or tool holders, which helps prevent damage to sharpened edges and keeps the tools organized. Often more than one tool can be hung in a small area.

Short-handled or hand tools can be stored using a pegboard system.

“An outline of the tool drawn on the pegboard can help with identification of a missing tool,” Fischer says.

If a tool is missing, check outside. Attach bright marking tape to the handle of tools to spot them more easily outdoors.

Garden tools are typically exposed to soil and moisture.

“To preserve tools and keep them in proper working order, it is extremely important for tools to be clean and dry before storing,” Fischer says.

Use a wire brush, paint scraper, or a strong blast from a hose to remove caked-on soil from shovels and hand trowels. Wipe small hand tools, such as pruners or shears, to remove any sap or moisture from the blades. Turpentine, alcohol, or mineral spirits can remove stubborn sap. Fine steel may be used, if needed.

Once clean and dry, apply an oil-based protective coating to any metal surfaces to prevent rust. If desired, use a good quality spray paint to protect metal surfaces. Wear appropriate personal protective equipment to protect eyes and hands while doing this.

Wooden handles should be free of rough areas. Sanding will help smooth out these spots. To maintain the life of the wooden handles, apply a protective coating using boiled linseed oil, oil from dried flax seeds. Polish smooth with a dry soft cloth.

Good quality hand pruners can be disassembled for cleaning and sharpening. Many pruner manufacturers have replaceable blades. Use a wire brush, sandpaper, or steel wool and a good deal of effort to remove dirt, rust, and sap from pruner blades.

“It’s very important to examine the blades for any damage due to cracks, nicks, or burrs,” Fischer says. “The beveled edge of the blade should be sharpened at the same angle as the bevel.”

Before storing tools away for the winter, sharpen any dull tools used for digging or pruning and file down any nicks. When it comes to sharpening, tools such as whetstones or files, are a matter of personal preference and ability.

Whetstones come in different gradations and sizes. A longer stone may be easier to use for garden tools. Whetstones require a lubricant such as 3-in-1 oil.

Diamond-coated flat files can last a lifetime and only require water for lubrication. For a quick sharpening job during the season, try a ceramic sharpener. Another quick fix is a bastard file.

“It is not advisable to use power grinding stones,” Fischer says. “Heat generated through friction can make the metal brittle.”

Once tools are sharp, coat the blade or metal surface lightly with an oil lubricant such as WD-40.

SOURCE: [Mary Fischer](#), Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

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