

Gardening Basics

Caring for Gardening Tools

During the winter while not much outdoor gardening is going on, preventative maintenance of your garden tools is a great way to prepare for Spring. This maintenance includes cleaning and sanitizing your tools, sharpening blades, and maintenance of any power tools you may have.

Work Location

- Excellent lighting
- Good ventilation

Supplies

- Safety glasses and thick gloves to protect your eyes and hands
- Mill file, carborundum stone, and vise grips for sharpening
- Water-displacing penetrating lubricant to remove and prevent rust, and lubricate moving parts
- Lubricating or cooking spray to remove plant sap
- Double-boiled linseed oil to preserve wood handles
- Wire brush and a putty knife to remove soil
- Sandpaper to smooth wood handles and steel wool to polish metal surfaces



"Garden tools" by Poughkeepsie Day School is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Step 1: Clean

Use the wire brush and/or putty knife and soap and water on hand tools (shovels, spades, trowels, rakes, hoes, pruning shears, loppers, and hedge clippers). Remove sap with a cloth and a lubricant or cooking spray.

Disinfect the blades of garden hand tools with 70% rubbing alcohol. A 10% chlorine bleach/water solution be used instead, but unless rinsed off after 30 minutes, can corrode metal. Disinfect tools after every tool use.

The University of Minnesota Extension provides detailed explanations of different tool cleaning solutions.

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/clean-and-disinfect-gardening-tools>

Step 2: Sharpen

Sharpen the cutting edges of pruning shears, loppers, hedge clippers, hoes and mower blades and the scoop edges of shovels, spades, and trowels with a honing stone or fine fall. Be cautious if using a bench grinder to avoid damaging the steel temper of shovels and hoes. If uncomfortable sharpening blades, an internet search will help locate blade sharpeners nearby. Some hardware and sewing shops may have sharpeners.

Explore these links for excellent how-to guidelines for sharpening hand tools:

Wisconsin Horticulture:

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/maintaining-lawn-and-garden-tools/>

University of Florida Gardening Solutions:

<https://gardenningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/tools-and-equipment/sharpening-your-tools>

If you're not comfortable taking on the sharpening task, check with local hardware stores to see if they offer this service.

Step 3: Lubricate

Wipe all metal surfaces with lubricating oil to remove and prevent rust. After cleaning and sanding any nicks, wipe wooden handles with boiled linseed oil. **IMPORTANT:** Oily rags, especially those used with linseed oil, can spontaneously combust and cause fires. Place used rags in an air-tight container like a glass jar or metal coffee can, fill with water to thoroughly soak the rags, and seal tightly. Contact your trash service for the local disposal procedure.

Step 4: Prepare Other Tools

Tighten hardware on wheelbarrows and utility carts and to prevent rust, spray paint any worn spots that reveal bare metal. Lubricate wheels so they don't squeak. Examine tires and wheels. Replace if needed.

Step 5: Store

Store your clean, sharp, and renewed tools in a clean and dry location. Hand tools should be stored upright off the floor on a pegboard, for instance, and shovels, etc. in racks or on wall hangers. During the growing season, keep a wire brush or putty knife near where you store your tools to clean them as you put them away.

Power Tools

Follow the owner's manual for maintenance of power tools. Remove any plant debris and weed seeds from under the mower deck, string trimmer guard and mechanism, and in crevices of other power tools. Tighten loose screws and nuts, remove fuel from the tank, change the oil, check spark plugs if needed. Examine electrical cords and connections. Replace any damaged or worn parts. Remove batteries from tools. Store batteries at room temperature separately from the tools. Following EPA guidelines found at the link below to prevent lithium-ion battery fires.

EPA Lithium Ion Batteries-Frequently Asked Questions

<https://www.epa.gov/recycle/frequent-questions-lithium-ion-batteries#08>

Resources

"Disinfecting Your Garden Tools", Florida-Friendly Gardening Information from University of Florida/IFAS, (accessed 12 Aug. 2024), <https://gardenningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/tools-and-equipment/disinfecting-tools/>

"Preventing Spontaneous Combustion of Oil-Soaked Rags", Fire Dept., Bend, Oregon, 2013, (accessed 12 Aug-2024), <https://www.bendoregon.gov/home/showdocument?id=16299>

Roach, Kerrie, "Winter Tool Care," Home & Garden Information Center, Clemson Cooperative Extension, 23 Jan. 2020, (accessed 12 Aug. 2024),

https://hgic.clemson.edu/winter-toolcare/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weekly-updates

Vandiver, Taylor, "Winterizing Garden Tools," UF/IFAS Extension Leon County, 21 Dec. 2013, (accessed 12 Aug. 2024), <http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/leonco/2013/12/20/winterizing-garden-tools/>

i

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension is an equal opportunity employer and program provider.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts cooperating.
