

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.

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
- Turpentine to remove plant sap
- 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



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Step 1 Clean and remove any soil and debris. 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 any plant debris and weed seeds from under the mower deck, string trimmer guard and mechanism, and in crevices of other power tools.

Disinfect the blades of pruning shears and loppers with rubbing alcohol. You can also use a 10% chlorine bleach/water solution but unless rinsed off after 30 minutes, it can cause corrosion. Disinfecting should be done after every use. Use steel wool or a wire brush to remove rust from metal surfaces.

Step 2 Sharpen the cutting edge of pruning shears, loppers, hedge clippers, and mower blades. Sharpen the scoop edge of shovels, spades, and trowels. Explore these links for excellent how-to guidelines for sharpening hand tools:

Cornell University Cooperative Extension:

https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/cwas/files/2013/01/Caring_for_Your_Tools.pdf

University of Florida Gardening Solutions:

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

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

Step 3 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 Follow the owner’s manual for maintenance of power tools. Typically, these steps include tightening loose screws and nuts, removing fuel from the tank, changing the oil, checking and replacing spark plugs as needed, and replacing any damaged or worn parts.

Step 5 Tighten hardware on wheelbarrows and utility carts and to prevent rust, spray paint any worn spots that reveal bare metal. Grease wheels so they don’t squeak.

Step 6 Now that you have all your tools in tip-top shape, store them 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. Remember to disinfect cutting blades after every use.

Resources:

University of Florida:

<https://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/tools-and-equipment/disinfecting-tools.html>

<http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/leonco/2013/12/20/winterizing-garden-tools/>

Clemson Cooperative Extension:

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

Bend, Oregon, Fire Department – Disposing of Oily Rags

<https://www.bendoregon.gov/home/showdocument?id=16299>