

Garden Tool Maintenance

Be Good to Your Garden Tools and They'll Be Good to You

We all know how important it is to have the right tool for the job, but many of us don't realize how important it is to take proper care of the tool so that it continues to perform at its peak. This holds true for all tools... especially garden tools.

Garden tools are probably the most neglected of tools. We use them, abuse them, and put them away dirty and wet only to see them rust and lose their effectiveness over time. But with proper maintenance and a little time spent, your tools can last and be effective for many years to come.

Proper Tool Storage



The best advice I can give you regarding garden tools is to put them away. Do not leave them outside! Not only will proper storage keep unnecessary moisture away from your tools, it will also protect your valuable tools from theft. Even when rain is not in your forecast, tools left outside are exposed to moisture from wet grass and dew.

When storing your tools, keep them off the ground so they're not exposed to moisture on your garage or shed floor. Hanging racks like the one pictured are a convenient way to hang several long-handled tools in one small area. They also help prevent damage to sharpened edges. For smaller tools, try using a pegboard system to hang your tools. Not only will it keep your tools off the ground, but it will help you with good tool organization. If each tool has a space, it's more likely that the tool will get put away after use. A pegboard system also helps you identify if you have any missing tools. If a peg is empty, you know to take another jog around the yard before calling it a night.

Clean and Dry Tools

Because most garden tools are exposed to dirt and moisture, this is the first place to start when it comes time for tool maintenance. Cleaning and drying your garden tools will keep them in good working order. For shovels, rakes and trowels that come in contact with soil, wash the dirt off with the strong spray from your hose. If the dirt is caked on, keep a brush nearby for a good scrubbing. Most importantly, dry your tools thoroughly before putting them away. I installed a hook in my garage near my garden tools so I could keep an old towel handy for drying.

You'll also want to be sure to wipe down smaller tools, like pruners and shears, before putting them away. This will help you remove any moisture, as well as sap, from the blades. Turpentine is an effective solvent for removing stubborn sap. Remember, be careful as you wipe the blades as they are very sharp. And once again, be sure to properly dry your tool before storing.

Prevent Rust



While proper storing, cleaning and drying are important to the condition of your tool, it's still important to prevent rust. The most effective way to prevent rust is to provide some type of protective coating to the surface. Given the high cost of quality garden tools, it's important to take this step to ensure many productive hours in the garden.

General Tool Maintenance

Some general maintenance is also handy for keeping your garden tools in good shape. There are several tips we recommend: First, for wood-handled tools, sand the handle if it becomes rough. This will help prevent splinters. And for all wood-handled tools, apply a light coating of boiled linseed oil to help prevent the wood from drying out and cracking.

Second, you will want to apply some type of lubricant like to your pruners, loppers, and similar tools. This will ensure smooth operation of moving parts and will also help prevent rust from forming.



Before Evapo-Rust

After Evapo-Rust

Third, remove rust that has already formed. Because many of us have not practiced proper tool maintenance, we're probably facing a garage full of rusty tools. If that's the case for you, do not worry, there is still hope. There are several types of rust removal products available.

Keep Your Tools Sharp

Another key to garden tool maintenance is keeping your tools sharp. Sharp tools not only are more effective, but they reduce your frustration. A sharp pruner will cut through a branch with ease, and a sharp shovel will dig into hard clay soils. Sharpening garden

tools requires just a two simple tools, a mill file and a small handheld sharpener.

The bigger tools like shovels, spades and hoes only require the use of a mill file. Mill files are available in bastard, second, and smooth cut. The bastard cut is the most aggressive while the smooth cut leaves the finest finish. Each cut is available in different sizes. Because larger files are cut coarser, we recommend a 10" second cut or an 8" bastard cut for garden tools. Another vital piece of a file is the handle. These are sold separately but make the sharpening process much easier and safer.



Before you use the file, secure your tool so you do not have to chase it around while you are trying to sharpen it. Once secured, find the angle where the tool was previously sharpened. Now use your mill file held at that angle and push the tool across the edge. Do not push the file back and forth on the tool! Files were meant to cut on the push stroke, and pulling will only serve to dull the file. Continue this process until the entire edge of your tool is sharpened. You will know it is sharpened when the entire edge

looks like bright, shiny metal. Mill files can be found at almost any hardware store.

The smaller tools like pruners, loppers, and shears require a keener edge to perform their duties, so we recommend a small diamond stone for sharpening. Sharpening using a diamond stone is much like a file. Secure the blade of your tool; a small vise works well if you have one. Next find the angle where your tool was previously sharpened. If you have trouble finding the angle try this trick: Use a permanent marker and apply the marker to the blade edge. Rub your stone across the edge at your selected angle. If you removed the marker behind the blade edge, you need to sharpen at a steeper angle, if you only removed the marker from the front edge you need to reduce the angle. Once you've found a good angle just rub the diamond stone back and forth with your coarse side until all your edge is uniformly sharp. Now switch to your fine side and sharpen using the same angle. Your edge is now ready for use. If you feel the edge starting to get dull again, you can skip the coarse grit and just use a few strokes with the fine stone to keep your tool in excellent shape.

With a little effort and time your garden tools will be tip-top shape for years to come. Even tools that have been neglected can be nursed back into shape. Proper storage, cleaning and drying, general maintenance, and sharpening will result in more effective tools and more productive time in the garden.

The Rust Store 2006

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