Sharpen or Suffer: Caring for Your Tools

Researched and written by a Parker County Master Gardener

How many of us have forgotten to clean off our tools, left them outside (even if it's not raining), or just thrown them on the garage or shed floor on top all the other tools. The answer is probably yes to all of the above. Tools are expensive—we all know that and to ruin any one of them through neglect is unnecessary and frustrating.

Garden tools are probably the most neglected of tools. We use them, abuse them, and put them away dirty only to see them rust and lose their effectiveness over time. A sharp tool is truly a thing of beauty and a dull tool is the cause of frustration and discouragement.

So here are, hopefully, some helpful "tools" to keep your gardening equipment looking sharp and staying sharp.

Rule number one: Put your tools away! Do not leave them outside! Even if there's no rain in the forecast, tools can still be exposed to moisture through sprinkler systems or dew on the grass. Use hanging racks, pegboards (for smaller tools), anything that keeps the surface of the tool off the ground and away from dirt, moisture, and possible nicks or dents resulting from being dropped.

Rule number two: Clean and dry your tools. Whether your tools come in contact with dirt or plant material, they need to be cleaned after each use. Yes, this can be tedious, but it increases their longevity and cuts down on the amount of sharpening that needs to be done.

For hoes, shovels, rakes and other larger tools, hose them off with a strong spray of water. If that isn't enough, use a stiff brush to get the tool completely clean. This is usually necessary when digging in clay soils that can harden and stick to the metal surface. For hand tools, wash with water and use a solvent such as turpentine to remove any sap. Be careful when wiping off sharp hand pruners.

Whatever the tool is, wipe it dry after you have cleaned it. In your tool storage area, keep a towel to dry off your tools before putting them away. If nothing else, the towel will remind you to wash off your tools—and your hands.

Rule number three: While proper storing, cleaning and drying are important to the condition of your tools, 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. There are aerosol sprays available, or you can use a cheaper method. Take about five gallons of sand, pour a quart of motor oil into the sand, mix that up and then dip your tools into that mix. The sand helps remove any last little particles of dirt and the oil provides a protective coat against moisture. Some people leave this as a permanent set-up in their tool storage area. You can leave the tool in the mix or remove it after a good dipping, wipe it off and hang it up.

Another cheap and quick way to clean your tools is to take an onion bag, put small pea gravel in it, and rub it on the tool to clean off the dirt. This is to clean, not to sharpen the tool. You can take that same onion bag, put slivers of soap in it and rub your garden tools with the bag. The onion bag works as an abrasive and the soap helps clean the tool. Whatever you do, wipe any moisture off the tool and then put a thin coat of a lubricant on it like 3-in-1 oil.

To get rid of accumulated rust, use steel wool and a light lubricant. Some people will spit on the tool surface as a lubricant—it does work. Some of my tools are so rusty I don't think I will have that much saliva in my life.

Rule number four: Don't forget the handle. Wooden handles need attention, too. Rough, dry handles cause splinters and can loosen your grip. Lightly sand handles and coat them with linseed oil and lightly wipe dry. Don't forget the point of attachment to the tool blade and tighten it if loose, and of course, make sure it is clean and rust-free.

The path of least resistance

The idea behind sharpening an edge is simple. Reduce the surface area of the blade so it will penetrate what you're cutting. A sharp tool penetrates easily; a dull tool has greater surface area along the rough edge and resists penetrating. It really is that simple: one chip in an axe, knife, or hoe can make a tiring difference. Keep the edges smooth and the resistance will stay to a minimum.

If you are sharpening the edge often, you need to thicken it a bit. If you are working too hard, thin the edge a little. If the blade is too thin, even if the edge is sharp, will take too much energy to work. If the edge is too thin, the blade will break. It's the difference between using a splitting maul to cut a tree versus a razor blade. The maul is too thick and it won't penetrate the wood deeply enough to chop down the tree. The razor blade is sharp enough, but the edge is too thin, so it will break.

A hoe, pick or shovel should be sharpened to make digging easier. The thickness of the edge is determined by the kind of dirt you are working. If it is loose soil with no rocks (where?), the edge can be thin to cut roots. If there are hard rocks in the soil, the edge must be thicker.

Before sharpening, check to see if the tool needs sharpening on one or both sides. Some tools like pruners, scissors and loppers only need sharpening on one side. You can see this clearly on the blades. Tools, axes and hoes need sharpening on both sides.

Here are some basic ways to sharpen your tools

- With a file. Bigger tools require the use of a mill file. They are available in bastard, second and smooth cut. The bastard is the coarsest. They can be purchased in different cuts and lengths. Garden tool sharpening guides recommend a 10" second cut or an 8" bastard cut. Don't forget to buy a handle.

- When using a file, do not push it in a back and forth motion. Only push forward; pulling back dulls the metal surface of the file and can ruin it.

- With a handstone. Handstones do well on hard steels, but don't work as fast as files. Handstones can also be lubricated so they're easier to use. Rub the stone surface in a circular motion along the blade until you see the edge shine. Handstones can come with two grits—one on either side and if you want to spend some money, you can buy a 10,000-grit Japanese Water Honing Stone for about $300.00.

- With a sharpening steel. Steels are metal rods that can come with a set of nice kitchen knives for sharpening. They are drawn down the blade in one direction only. If applicable, repeat on the other side of the blade. Steels put a good finishing cutting edge on a knife. They don't remove much material; instead they shape and texture the edge. Some sharpening steels are embedded with durable diamonds and some sharpeners are made of porcelain.

- With a Dremel tool. This hand-held do-it-all tool can be used to put a fine edge on your tools. That's the catch—a fine edge can mean too fine, which means either you're chipping the tool's edge or you're always turning around and resharpening. It's quick and easy, but don't get carried away.

- With a grinding wheel. If there's much steel to come off, a coarse file or stone is better but they can be relatively quick to put an edge on the tool. Like Dremel tools, a little can go a long way and you can ultimately do more damage to the blade.

Sources

There are many places to go on the Internet for tool sharpening information. I have a book called simply "Gardening Tools" that describes about every tool imaginable and how to care for them. If you're further interested in sharpening knives or using handstones, go to a local knife shop and see how they can help. At any rate, I hope this information is useful and will bring you years of enjoyment from the gardener's best friends.