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gardening BY RACHEL FOSTER

TLC for Tools

Wood and steel need help in this climate

A few years ago I confessed, right in this space, how badly I treat my gardening tools and claimed I would do better in future. My husband had just splurged on a garage overhaul that left us with a work bench, lots of handy shelving and a proper tool rack. Trouble is, I didn't really follow through. The bench became a storage area for watering equipment and empty pots. My hand tools still sat in a slightly muddy pile on a shelf. The tool rack did help keep shovels and forks in order, but they were not a whole lot cleaner than before.

I have never found guilt to be a very effective motivator. What I need is inspiration, and it arrived when I saw Todd Berger's and Annie Paschall's garden tool shed. Berger and Paschall live in an elegant house that they designed and built themselves, mostly from recycled wood. Behind their house is a huge garden where they grow much of their own food. Berger loves garden tools, especially old ones, which he enjoys bringing back to life. Even in the middle of a busy fall, every tool in the shed looked cared for. I wanted to know how to make my own tools look like that.

This winter I showed up at Berger's house with a couple of Smith and Hawken trowels and a Japanese planting hoe that had lain in someone's border through an entire winter. The trowels were basically sound, but the ferrules had come loose from the shrunken wood handles. The planter had a rusty blade and a partially rotted handle, and in dry summer weather the head of the planter no longer fit tightly on the handle. Berger glanced at it and nodded. "There are problems with wood and steel in this climate," he said. All the same, he assured me, I could have saved my hand tools from problems caused by shrinkage just by cleaning and drying them after use and by oiling the wood occasionally.

After fixing the loose ferrules on my trowels (procedure: tap in place with a hammer, drill a hole through the ferrule and insert a small brass pin) Berger picked up a cabinet scraper and showed me how to scrape away the softened wood on a handle, keeping the scraper going with the grain. Next he cleaned up the metal parts with a wire wheel. (Steel wool and some elbow grease will work, he

says.) After we sanded the trowel handles with 150 grit sandpaper, then 220 grit for a nice smooth surface, they were ready for oiling. Berger put the Japanese planter in a vice and planed off the partially rotted surface wood with a spoke shave to reveal a slimmer but perfectly useable white oak handle. After a light scraping and sanding, it too was ready to be oiled.

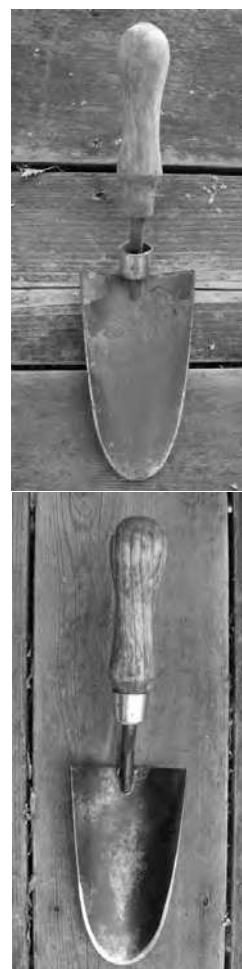
The oil Berger uses for this purpose is pure Tung oil, which he says has an ability to "get right in there and rejuvenate the wood." We applied the oil liberally, with a cloth moistened with a dab of turpentine (the turpentine aids absorption) and continued to apply oil until the handles began to feel sticky. We wiped off the excess and set the tools in a warm place. The handle on the mistreated Japanese planter looked dry again after a while, so I applied more oil.

Now I'm working on some of my larger tools, starting with my oldest digging fork. After 25 years of constant use, all it needed was sanding and oiling to save the aging handle—a real testament to its quality. Good tools, well cared for, will outlive their owner. Some of the newer tools, and those I use less often, are still partially coated with the paint and varnish they came with. I'd like to remove the varnish in order to oil the wood. The cabinet scraper will remove varnish, paint and labels from wood,

Berger told me. If I'm not up to maintaining the special edge on a scraper, he said, a piece of broken glass will work.

Or you could just sand with coarse paper (80-100 grit) before proceeding as above. The goal is to make the wood look uniform with one grade of paper before proceeding to the next finer grade. To remove paint from the metal parts, Berger prefers a less toxic paint stripper such as one that's citrus based. He also suggests coating bare metal by painting on a mixture of paraffin wax and mineral spirits, about 50:50. He couldn't remember the exact proportions because he hasn't done it for so long: Properly stored, metal develops its own protective patina. **EW**

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