

KEEPING BUSY

Maintaining high-quality tools pays off

I recently took a couple of hours to do something I've been putting off for ages: cleaning and oiling my gardening tools. Until we moved into a different house five years ago, I kept my tools in a dry, attached garage. Now I keep everything but my best pruning tools in a garden shed that's more or less open to the moisture-laden air.

Although the tools are out of the rain, they are rusting. Perhaps this would have happened eventually in my old garage, but whatever deterioration there was in 15 years, I didn't notice it.

So last month I washed the tools with plain water, scrubbing off visible dirt with a scrunched-up piece of nylon bird netting, then left them to dry in the weak November sun. When they were dry I oiled the metal parts with motor oil and the wood handles with linseed oil. I know I first should have sanded off the visible rust on those neglected shovels. Maybe next time. For now, I'm just trying to slow down their decline.

Cleaning the tools was quite satisfying. They now look a lot nicer, for one thing. It also gave me a chance to handle and inspect tools I usually take for granted, noticing how they are constructed, how they are holding up to hard use and neglected maintenance, and how some of the older tools have odd little details in the finishing, like artistically rendered makers' names, or rivets with decorated heads. Many of those tools were purchased in the 1970s and '80s from the now-defunct company Smith and Hawken. It's hard to find tools of the same quality today.

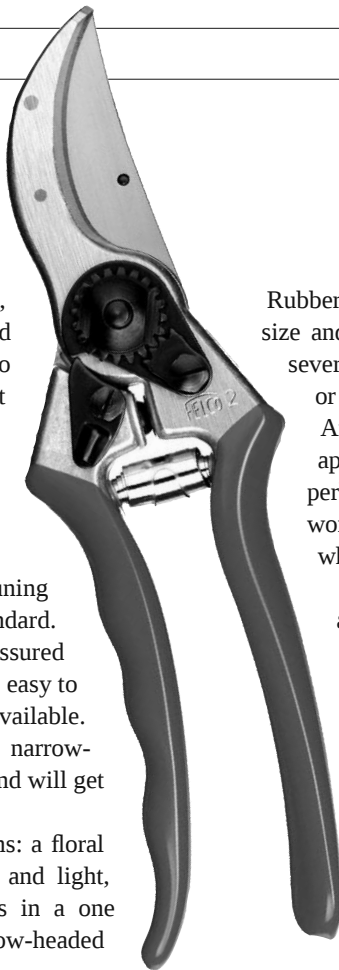
Decent, functional tools are still available, however, and they make great gifts for the gardeners on your list.

I'm convinced there are many frustrated, would-be gardeners out there who only need the right tools to get them going. It is hard to get good results without good tools, and at best it's a lot more work. Down to Earth has a good selection of pruning, weeding and digging tools — and a knowledgeable staff. Hardware stores are great for basic tools like shovels, picks and rakes.

Everyone needs a good pair of pruning shears, and Felco brand is the gold standard. If they seem like an extravagance, rest assured they are worth the price because they are easy to adjust and repair, and parts are readily available. Long-handled loppers are useful, but a narrow-bladed, folding pruning saw is cheaper and will get the same job done.

Two inexpensive hardware store items: a floral shovel, long-handled but small-headed and light, great for planting anything that comes in a one gallon pot or smaller; and a light, narrow-headed wire shrub rake by Green Thumb.

Hand hoes are appealing little items. They may be designed especially for weeding (with a narrow, thin blade, usually triangular, with one or more pointed corners) or can be more general purpose, Japanese-style, for small planting jobs and cruder weeding. Both are useful. Everyone needs a sturdy trowel, but prolonged troweling can give you a nasty case of repetitive stress injury. A suitable hoe can be a healthier alternative for planting large quantities of small starts.



Rubber containers with integral handles, bushel-size and smaller, are indispensable. Everybody needs several, and they come in lots of colors. Rubber boots or waterproof clogs are a no-brainer in Oregon. And a good many gardeners would probably appreciate a pair of binoculars (a second pair, perhaps) to hang up somewhere nearby while they work outside. Birds don't stick around obligingly while you run inside to get your best ones.

Can't decide? Gift cards and certificates are always an option and can get the recipient anything from garden art to a load of compost. Support your local brick-and-mortar retailers and save on shipping!

When you are done gift shopping, there is plenty to do outside. Neatness counts for a lot in winter, when there isn't much to see but order and definition. It's always worth getting out to rake leaves from paths and lawns. In fine weather you can prune and transplant trees and shrubs or remove excess fall leaves from evergreens and from areas where small bulbs will emerge in spring. And there is always weeding — it's so much easier in winter!

When the weather is truly awful, it's easy to forget about the garden. But it's a good idea to keep excess rain off compost piles, make sure valuable containers are draining properly and to occasionally water plants that are under eaves. And you can always clean your tools. ■

Rachel Foster of Eugene is a writer and garden consultant. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org.

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