GARDENING TOOLS
GUIDELINES FOR THEIR SELECTION, USE AND CARE

I. **Gloves**. Leather vs. cloth. Personal choice EXCEPT when sharpening tools.

II. **Trowels**. Steel trowels rust, but aluminum trowels wear much faster. Textured/cushioned handles make them much easier on your hands and wrists.

III. **Shovels.**

A. There are many kinds of shovels and they come in several sizes, shapes and forms including "digging" shovels, rounded and flat "scoop" shovels, and other specialty shovels.

1. "Digging" shovels can look similar, but be quite different in size, shape, and handle angle, and these characteristics can affect the ease of using them.

2. "Scoop" shovels are good for moving loose soil or gravel, but not for "digging."

3. Short handled shovels of any kind. They are LOVED by back doctors. You have to bend over to use them, and your reduced leverage makes each shovel full heavier than with a long handled shovel.

B. Desirable characteristics of a good shovel:

1. What are you going to use it for: digging down or scooping up dirt/gravel? If you are scooping up material, a higher handle angle is helpful so that you don't have to bend over so far. But if you are digging, a lower handle angle is more convenient so that you don't have to lean forward as much.

2. The lower end of the handle (next to the spade portion) should extend well into the metal top of the spade portion of the shovel to make the joint stronger.

3. Wood vs. fiberglass handle. This is primarily a personal choice. Fiberglass won't rot or decay, and will probably last longer than a wood handle. However, fiberglass is smoother/more slippery than a wood handle, and may be a disadvantage some times.

4. If you buy any tool with a wood handle, make sure that the grain of the wood is very straight the entire length of the handle, without bends, and that the grain is parallel to the length of the handle, in contrast to running at an angle. In other words, you should be able to trace one line of grain from the spade end to the other end of the handle without the line of grain veering off the handle.

5. Foot pads. As a minimum the top of the spade where your foot pushes on the shovel should be curled over or doubled for additional support to both your foot and the spade. The wider the footpad, the more comfortable it will be on your foot and the stronger the shovel will be.

6. The portion of the shovel blade that digs into the ground should be sharpened to a moderately sharp edge, similar to a dull knife. The sharper this angle is, the easier it is to dig down into the soil.

C. Caring for a shovel:

1. Store the shovel inside, not out in the dirt and weather.

2. After using a shovel, PUT IT AWAY CLEAN. Wash both the blade AND handle, and scrub off all dirt and rust. Then use some steel wool to rub on a coat off WD-40, which will retard rusting.

3. Don't use a shovel as a pry bar for rocks or a spud bar for breaking up hard clay.

4. Periodically sharpen the pointed part of the blade. When sharpening the shovel, retain the point at the tip of the blade. Since the shovel wears more at the point than on the sides, you have to file the side portions of the blade, even though they don't look like they need it, or your shovel blade becomes rounder and rounder.

5. Use a moderately fine-toothed file to sharpen the shovel. BUT the most important accessory to sharpening is a heavy pair of LEATHER GLOVES. As you file, the file can (and probably will) slip at some time, and you don't want your bare hand unexpectedly slamming in to the sharpened edge of the blade. Shovels don't warrant the use of carborundum or diamond flake stones for sharpening (this is a shovel, not an ax); just use a "fine" file.

II. **HOES**

A. Use hoes for weeding, or for trenching or furrowing.

B. Some important points to remember when using hoes.

1. Stand up straight when you are hoeing to protect your back and you won't tire as quickly.

2. Hoe as shallowly as you can. Weed seeds are **in** the soil. If you turn up new dirt you bring up weed seeds that will then be encouraged to germinate AND GROW.

C. Caring for Hoes.
Clean them, sharpen them and care for them just like you do for shovels.

III. **TRIMMING TOOLS**

A. To do a good job of pruning or trimming, good pruning tools are just as important as good pruning techniques. This article will only address trimming TOOLS, not pruning or trimming techniques.

B. To make good and clean cuts the tool must be SHARP and correctly adjusted, AND the tool should be clean, in contrast to gunked up with pitch and sap. Sharpening is not going to be included in this article because it is a lengthy discourse of its own.

C. Trimming tools can be broken into the categories of pruning shears, loppers, hedge trimmers and pruning saws.

1. Pruning shears are for small branches, usually less than 1/4" in diameter.

2. Loppers (those with long handles) are for branches 1/4" to about 1" in diameter.

3. Pruning saws are for limbs larger than 1".

4. Hedge trimmers are the LONG BLADED trimmers used to make hedges look like flat sided/topped artificial plants that just came out of a box. The only thing worse than hedge trimmers for trimming bushes are electric or gas powered trimmers. You might as well use a string trimmer. (my sermon for the day)

5. Chain saws --- we aren't going to discuss that subject, even though it is my favorite.

D. What to look for when buying shears or loppers.

1. The blades should be made from hardened steel. Not anything that resembles aluminum.

2. They should have "pass-by" blade designs, versus "anvil" type. The pass-by blades CUT through the stems, in contrast to the anvil design that tends to smash the stem, and cause health problems in the end of the stem that is left. In addition, the anvil design dulls the blade more quickly than the pass-by design.

3. The handles should have some kind of a cushioning cover to reduce the wear and tear on your hands and reduce the tendency to slip in your hand. The handles should feel comfortable in your hand. Some shears are too large for small hands, which wears out the hand and wrist quickly.

4. With loppers, compare various brands to see how wide the spread of the handles has to be to cut a 1" limb. The less spread, the easier it is to handle the loppers, but possibly provides less force on the blades to cut the branch. I have a "new and improved" lopper that exerts a lot of force to cut through a limb, but the handles have to be spread VERY WIDE to get the blades around a 1" branch, so they are very inconvenient to use.

E. What to look for when buying pruning saws:

1. If is is a folding saw blade, the blade should fold completely into the handle when you are not using it so that the saw teeth are not exposed.

2. When opened, the blade should be securely locked in place so it won't fold up while you are cutting. Before using them, check to ensure the screw is TIGHT.

3. The blade should have large, very mean looking teeth that alternate in the direction that they are sharpened, and the teeth should "stick out" a little from the thickness of the blade.

4. I seldom recommend brand names, but Corona saws are really good and not unjustly pricey. But I found a better and more convenient Stihl saw.

5. ALWAYS wear heavy leather gloves when using a pruning saw.

F. Caring for trimming tools.

1. Keep them clean.

2. Keep them sharp. Sharpening instructions for pruners and loppers is not included in this article as mentioned previously. Saw blades should be sharpened by a professional saw sharpener.

3. Keep pruners and loppers tightly screwed together so that there is no leeway between the blade and the cutting surface. Tighten the nut tight enough that the blades won't open or close, and then loosen the nut just barely enough to permit the blade to open.

4. The same guidance applies to pruning saws. Keep the blade nut as tight as you can, but just barely loose enough to be able to open the blade.

IV. **CLEANING SUGGESTIONS**

A. "SUPER CLEAN" is a cleaner/degreaser that comes in a purple plastic bottle sold at Wal-Mart stores in the auto supplies department or auto part stores. Spray it full strength on a clipper, pruning saw, power saw chain, etc., let it sit a few minutes, and then wash it off with the hose nozzle. Occasionally two applications will be needed. The tool will sparkle. Super Clean is biodegradeable, so safe to use.

B. STEEL WOOL is helpful sometimes in removing gunk on the tools, particularly on the teeth of handsaws. I use medium or No. 1 textured steel wool. Wear leather gloves when using steel wool.

C. WD-40 is an excellent product to protect tools from rust. Spray on enough for it to spread/flow into all locations where metal rubs on metal. However, wipe off any remnant oil prior to trimming branches.
After you are through using AND CLEANING your clippers or saws, spray a little WD-40 on your clippers BEFORE you put them away.

D. Most literature recommends that if you are cutting diseased wood, you should clean the cutting blades after each cut by immersing the blades in rubbing alcohol or household bleach. That's a great recommendation. No, I've never done it.

V. **SHARPENING SUGGESTIONS**

A. Clippers and saws are MUCH easier to use if they are sharp, AND they cut much cleaner and more accurately.

B. When using a file or sharpening stone to sharpen clipper blades, use LEATHER GLOVES. The file or sharpening stone is secondary AFTER the importance of leather gloves.

C. Techniques for sharpening clipper blades (and pocket knives) is a lesson in itself, so we won't try to address that subject. Sharpening saws is a job to be done by professionals. However, here are some general suggestions.

1. Sharpening tools:
    a. Heavy leather gloves.
    b. A secure mount to hold the tool steady.
    c. Moderately fine files for shovels and hoes, and a carborundum or diamond flake “stone” for clippers and lopers.

2. When sharpening shovels, hoes, clippers and loppers, the sharpening angle should be on ONLY ONE SIDE of the blade so that it looks like the top left hand of an “N”. NOT like a knife, which you sharpen with an angle on both faces of the blade (like the bottom of a “V”).

3. The file or sharpening stone is moved INTO the blade (toward the handle), not outward (away from the handle). This method is obviously more dangerous, since if your hand slips it moves toward the sharpened blade, but this is the correct way to create a sharp cutting blade. That is why you should ALWAYS wear heavy leather gloves.

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