

SOG Notebook for Urban Organic Vegetable & Herb Gardening

Garden Tools

By Rob Danforth

Having the right tools for the task and for the gardener helps make gardening enjoyable. With a little care, tools will last for years – some of mine are over 30 years old.



(hand tools for pots

extended tools help in box beds)

Garden tools are a personal choice. What works well for one may not suit another gardener. The length, grip, weight, construction, durability, and cost all have to be taken into consideration. Over the past 45 years I have owned or tried a large number of garden tools for all types of gardens: plots, pots, box beds, raised beds, and cold frames. I donated those that did not suit me to various organizations – such as the Ottawa Tool Library, Senior Organic Gardeners, and Just Food.



There are a great many to choose from in a variety of materials: plastic, resin, aluminum, chrome molybdenum, iron, high carbon steel, stainless steel, and other unspecified metal alloys. *(Claw: Unspecified Metal Alloy)*. Wood handles

(ash is popular) are durable but over time they do sliver, especially if they get wet – the wood swells and then shrinks as it dries. Some tools are “ergonomic” in design and the grip and shape will suit gardeners with particular needs. Also, although most tools can be used easily in either hand, some garden tools favour a right-handed gardener. The *Yankee weed hoe* is one example. **Tip:** Garden gloves protect against slivers, blisters, stinging weeds, thorny/prickly plants, and soil.



Throughout the season, an urban gardener will use tools for scooping soil and compost (small shovel); carrying soil, fertilizer, chopped weeds, or mulch (trug); aerating soil (fork or claw cultivator); shaping soil (soil hoe); planting seeds, bulbs, or seedlings (narrow blade transplant trowel); weeding (weed trowel, weed hoe, or soil hoe); cutting produce and chopping up material for the compost (harvest knife); trimming plants and disease surgery (pruners); levelling soil, gathering weed cuttings, and debris (soil rake); mixing compost (compost aerator) and end of season cutting out plants and thick roots (serrated trowel).



(Small shovel, rake, hoe/claw,

Trugs,

Serrated trowels)

A basic starter tool set of a size to suit your garden might be: shovel, fork, soil hoe, soil rake, serrated trowel, harvest knife (I use a retired bread knife with excellent results), pruner, and trug. **Tip:** Rather than purchasing a set, build a collection of tools from many different manufacturers based on needs. Buying a tool set may seem like a cost saving, but not all the tools in the set may suit your gardening methods and you may find yourself discarding some and purchasing others to meet a specific need or way in which you prefer to work.

Choose a size suited to both your garden and your gardening methods (measurements are approximate):

*My indoor tools (6"/15cm):
small trowel, chop sticks as
aerator, scissors, mini
trowel.*



- Hand tools (14"/36 cm): trowel or serrated trowel, claw cultivator, soil hoe, pruners, soil rake. There are also combination tools available (e.g., *Soil hoe/claw* and weed hoe/rake).



- Extended-length hand tools (18"/46 cm fixed handles or extendable/telescoping tools of 36"/1 m): shovel, hoe, claw cultivator, rake, compost aerator. Combination tools such as shovel/pick and soil hoe/claw are available.

(Extended fork, rake, claw, hoe – 4 tools but 3 different manufacturers).



Working in soil will cause all tools to wear down. These tools should be sharpened for best results. A metal file or a whet stone works very well, or you can be more aggressive with an electric drill and a grind stone, or even a hand-held carbide cutter which actually “shaves” the metal thinner. Some of the softer alloys wear down faster while iron and steel wear down much more slowly. **Tip:** Stainless steel is very durable, doesn’t rust (if forgotten in the rain), is slow to wear and easy to clean.

Tool Maintenance

A good practice is to clean and dry all tools after use and sharpen them at the end of every season if they need it. Soil-encrusted tools could transfer bacteria, fungus spores, viruses, or weed seeds to other parts of the garden and wet soil can cause staining or rusting on some tools. I clean soil from tools with a metal scraper (for large clumps of soil) and I dry brush them with a stiff brush to remove the powdery material. Wet tools can be dried with a rag. *(Rusted & Stainless standard trowels).*



Rusted tools can be cleaned with sand paper then lightly oiled. Heavily-rusted tools may need a wire brushing before sanding.



Sharpening small shovels, claws (cultivators), pruners, and hoes at the end of season removes nicks & burrs and gets them ready for the next season. A light oiling helps prevent rusting if you are storing the tools in an outdoor box or shed. *(3 Pruners)* Of course, you may wish to sharpen them whenever they are not performing as well as they might. Caution: “sharp” does not mean tools have to be sharp



enough to cut skin! The exceptions are pruners, knives, and one very sharp stainless-steel serrated trowel, which I highly recommend. *(Very Sharp Trowel)*

Wet tools can transfer disease from plant to plant or plant to composter, so it’s best not to prune after a rain or when dew is heavy. If disease (including tomato or potato blight) is present, it’s good practice to disinfect the tool with rubbing alcohol, bleach, or hot soapy water before using it on disease-free plants or before putting it away.

Wood-handled tools may need some sand paper treatment after a few years, and some softer metal alloys will need straightening (e.g., that claw that got stepped on). **Tip:** Always plunge sharp tools into the soil rather than lay them about where an unsuspecting hand or foot might find them and experience unwanted pain and suffering.

A few terms for the new gardener:

Aerator — any tool used to loosen soil or stir compost and allow air to penetrate. Plant roots and compost both need air to develop. In pots, top watering causes the soil to condense so a round tool, not a blade (I use a Jekyll weed fork or a chop stick) can be inserted and wiggled about without cutting roots. In box beds, a claw cultivator or round tine fork works well. **Tip:** Deep aeration is necessary if the soil has been compacted or condensed, and the air squeezed out.

Claw-Cultivator – this can be used to loosen soil around plants, and it doubles as a rake to remove roots and debris in the fall.

Dibber — for poking holes in soil so seeds can be planted. **Tip:** I use a chop stick or my finger or a hoe if I am making a shallow trench.

Soil hoe — primarily for moving soil about, hilling, trenching, and removing soil at harvest to get at root vegetables. They can also be used for weeding.

Soil Rake vs. Leaf rake – A soil rake has stiff tines and is used to level soil and rake out roots. A leaf rake has flexible tines and is primarily used for raking up debris in box beds and cold frames. Neither is practical for small containers.

Weed hoe — used for uprooting or cutting weeds just under the soil surface. Some hoes are small for pinpoint accuracy between plants (e.g., single-prong weed hoe), and others are larger for quick work in box beds (e.g., stirrup hoe). However, there are a great many different shapes, sizes, and compositions of weed hoes, more than any other garden tool. **Tip:** In tight areas, where there is a possibility of pulling vegetables with the weeds, pulling weeds by hand works better than any tool. If the roots have tangled, cut off the weed tops with scissors and leave the roots.



Tip: A Do-It-Yourself potting and cleaning station or a portable table can save a lot of bending over.

(DIY Potting & Cleaning Station)

Happy Gardening!

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