



HOME & GARDEN

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Fairchild’s tropical garden column: Maintaining garden tools

- HIGHLIGHTS
- Moisture is the enemy of tools; dry them thoroughly
- A thin coat of oil will help keep moisture away
- Shovels need TLC too



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Shovels need love too. A light coat of oil works wonders. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

BY KENNETH SETZER
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I love tools! While I don’t have many gardening tools, I try to make them last. A little maintenance keeps even the inexpensive tools happy, easier and safer to use, and will save you money in the long run.

The No. 1 enemy of tools is moisture, and gardening tools encounter their share of it. Cutting through wet plant parts, tossed on the damp soil or left out in the rain, the bare metal parts soon develop a coating of rust. On some items, like carbon steel blades, a layer of rust can actually be beneficial and protect the steel underneath from further deterioration. If you dry off the tool and store it indoors, the rust should not increase to the point where it destroys the blade.

However some parts, like the hollow steel handles of longer loppers, particularly those with telescoping handles, can rust to a catastrophic extent, especially the cheaper ones. After use, extend the telescoping handles to their fullest extent, wipe them with a dry rag, and spray a light coat of oil on them. Once free of moisture, they can be closed and stored.

For fixed blade knives, simply wiping the blades dry will usually suffice. A thin coat of oil is always beneficial. For folding knives, make sure debris is not hiding inside the hollow space for the blade, or at the folding point. If you can’t remove dirt with a folded rag or swab, rinse folding knives under running water to clean them thoroughly, but be sure to dry them completely and coat with oil.

The blades of garden shears and loppers require similar treatment. Wipe them down, and apply a thin coat of oil. The fulcrum of shears, like scissors, tend to accumulate grit. Washing and oiling should fix this. The blades will loosen over time, especially if you try cutting a limb too large for the tool. Most shears have a screw where the blades meet. Tighten it if necessary, but not so tight that the blades bind.

Garden tools needn’t gleam like a kitchen implement. Discoloration is to be expected. But if they get really grungy or corroded, you might save them by rubbing them down with steel wool. I like stainless steel wool, since it tends not to shred, rust or embed itself in your skin.

Sap sticks tenaciously to your hands and to tool blades. A mild solvent like citrus-based glue removers usually works. You may need to let the solvent sit on the affected part for a while.

Employing a good, sharp saw is one of life’s simple pleasures. The saw should work without much effort. Help it along by wiping it off after use. Remove that moisture-laden sawdust by wiping downwards only, away from the direction of the teeth. Use a rag, or even safer, a stiff brush. Take your time and spray your clean saw with oil. Tip: Before use, rub wax on your saw blade and teeth. An old candle is perfect. This helps ease the saw through wood.

SHOVELS ARE THE FORGOTTEN FOOT SOLDIERS OF YARD WORK. AT BEST THEY GET A RINSE TO REMOVE MUD.

shovels and garden trowels.

Don’t forget the wooden handles. These tend to dry out and split and are rough on the hands. You can spray oil on the wood to extend its life.

My kingdom for a garden hose that won’t kink or leak! Here, it seems I get what I pay for, with cheap hoses disappointing sooner than later. But even high-quality hoses are damaged by exposure to the sun. Rolling them up and out of the way helps maintain them. Another trick: If you find unscrewing the hose from the spigot to be difficult, rub candle wax on the threading first.

While pricey tools are usually beautiful and well made, even inexpensive garden tools can have a good long life. I have had an indispensable machete for many years that cost just \$6. It just takes a little bit of effort to maintain your tools, especially after a hot day in the yard, but remember: Clean tools work better, last longer and are safer for you and your plants!

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.



Lopper blades dry and oiled. The bolt allows for tightening. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

Shovels are the forgotten foot soldiers of yard work. At best they get a rinse to remove mud, mainly to keep the garage clean. After hosing, dry them and spray some oil on the blade. Hanging the shovel slightly off the ground helps keep it dry. The same treatment applies to small hand