

Tools of the trade

When Kristy Ramage felt her ramshackle collection of tools was in need of some loving care, she called on gardener Daniel Back to show her how to get it right

WORDS AND STYLING KRISTY RAMAGE PHOTOGRAPHS BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER

Maintenance

My friend Daniel Back is a gardener and designer who knows that a well-tended garden requires well-kept tools. When he came to visit, he helped overhaul my tool shed and showed me how to get the best from my tools. Dan takes a craftsman's approach to gardens and it follows that he keeps his tools in meticulous order. In peak condition they are a pleasure to use: efficient and sharp and longer lasting.



A place for everything

We started by making my shed as efficient a space as possible. We added some extra pegs for hanging tools, no more than two deep in an orderly row. Alongside the existing row of old wooden pegs with 'hook ends', we added a strip of hard wood and drilled pairs of holes, slightly upturning the angle, at 70mm apart, to take 12mm diameter metal pegs (120mm long). These are ideal for hanging tools with a T or D handle. Long-handled tools, such as rakes and hoes, are now kept out of the way on racks, fitted in the caves of the sloping ceiling; hand tools now hang on the wall opposite the door, so they're easy to spot, and everyone will be able to find the right tool for the job in hand.

We also filled a painted green box with a mix of sand and about 1.5 litres of used engine oil, obligingly supplied by my local garage. After removing the worst of the mud, you plunge any steel tool into the box and wriggle it around, before hanging it up, cleaned and protected in an instant.

Cleaning and oiling

Once he'd sorted out my storage, Dan explained how to clean and oil my tools properly. On a day-to-day basis, you need only scrape the soil off your tools and quickly wipe them over with an oily rag or plunge them into an oil and sand bucket, before hanging them up. But at least a couple of times a year, possibly more if it's particularly muddy, it's good to give everything a thorough clean.

Begin by scraping and washing off all mud. It's useful to have a wedge-shaped piece of hard wood (traditionally called a 'man') to scrape off most of the mud. For this purpose I have an old butter pat, sharpened to a chisel end, which works a treat. An old galvanised water tank, or even a dustbin or bucket positioned right by the shed is ideal for washing tools.

Scrub handles and tool ends with a stiff scrubbing brush, then place the tools in a warm place to make sure they are thoroughly dry. Any roughness on

handles (washing can lift the grain of the wood) can be rubbed down with fine sandpaper, and any rust on the steel removed with medium-grade steel wool.

Apply linseed or tung oil to the wooden handles and metal heads, using a soft rag. You can use either raw or boiled linseed oil, but boiled often has driers added to it, and is lighter so it will dry more quickly. Similarly tung oil, which is obtained by pressing the seed from the nut of the tung tree (*Vernicia fordii*), is available in a quick drying form or raw, and hardens on exposure to air. Hand tools can even be soaked in oil overnight, to feed and preserve the wood. Take out the following day, wipe off any excess oil and leave to dry.

Whatever you do, don't be tempted to store oily rags in bundles in hot sheds as they can easily combust. Instead, you should either keep them in a tin, with a lid, somewhere cool, or spread them out to dry between uses.

Sharpening

I quite often buy old tools from markets, as I like the feel, weight and look of them. Properly sharpened, they can often outperform many modern equivalents, but they do need to be sharp. And that goes not just for the obvious cutting tools – secateurs, shears, knives – but also hoes, spades and forks. Luckily, with the right equipment and knowledge it's a relatively straightforward task.



Reshaping a cutting edge

Dan used a wet and dry bench grinder to reshape the worn blade on my spade. It's a useful piece of kit if you're sharpening a lot of tools at once, especially if these are heavy duty blades, such as those on a lawn mower, or if the edge is really out of shape. To get back to a true edge, draw a straight line across the blade, and grind down to it, by resting the spade on the guide and gently pressing it into the rotating grinding stone.

Be wary of sparks when you're using a dry grit stone, and always use protective eyewear and gloves. You also need to be careful of the heat generated by the friction, which can take the temper out of the steel. Between grindings, plunge the blade in water to keep the heat down, or use the finer grade whetstone, which runs through a trough of water and takes material away more slowly – and can be used for the final sharpening too. After grinding back to the new line, a file should be used to remove any burrs, and give the spade a bevelled cutting edge.

Using a file

You shouldn't need to reshape your spade's blade too often, but it's a good idea to routinely sharpen its blade with a file. An efficient spade needs to be sharp enough to cut cleanly through earth or roots, but not so sharp that you risk injuring yourself. The bevel edge of a spade is on the top side: the side that carries the soil when you lift it up. Before you start, you need to make sure your spade's blade is free of all rust as this will dull the file. Use steel wool to remove any rust, and once the blade is clean, clamp the spade securely by the handle to a worktop or in a vice, with the lifting side facing up.

Using a flat bastard mill file, held at handle and tip, push it forwards – a file has teeth that face forward and cut only in one direction – across the edge. Once you've got an even bevel edge (this should be 45 degrees unless the original differs), clamp the spade's blade upright in the vice and run the file across the back edge a few times to remove any rough burrs (shown above).

Sharpening secateurs

After sorting out my spade, we turned our attention to my secateurs. It's good to sharpen secateurs regularly, especially after a heavy or prolonged period of use. A dull blade is frustrating and leaves ragged cuts on plants. For best results, you should use a diamond sharpener or sharpening stone.

Before you start, remove any sap that has built up on the inside of the blade and wipe the steel with an oily rag. Then hold the open secateurs in your left hand and run your sharpener over the bevel edge of the blade at 23 degrees (or follow the original angle). Turn them over and, with the sharpener flat against the blade, clean up the inside edge, removing any small burrs.

It can be tricky, but it's worth persevering as with some practice you'll find you get the feel of the bevel angle right. Once you're satisfied with the blades, lightly oil the moving parts. Apply saddle oil to leather holsters, which helps to keep them supple and looking cared for.

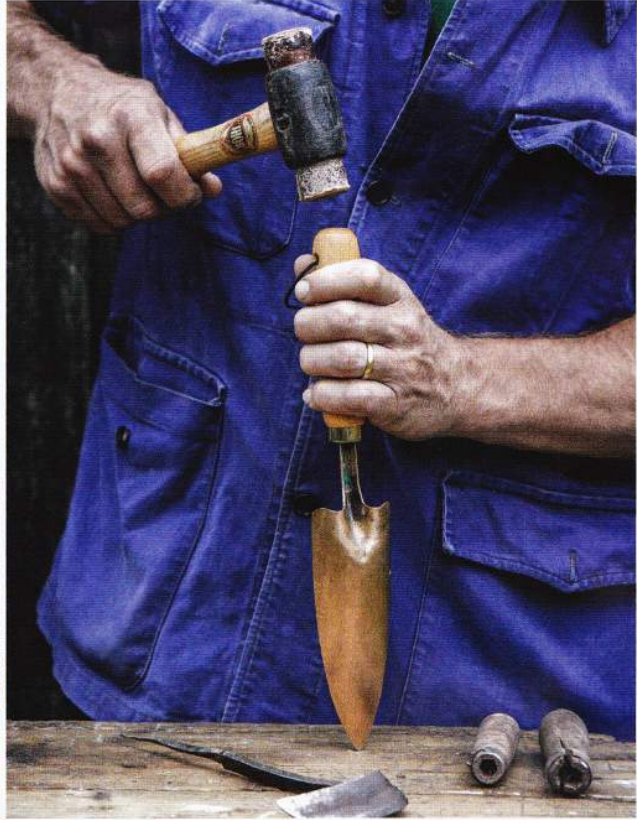
looking after garden tools





Handles

The most likely part of a tool to break is the handle. This happens less often if the tool has been well looked after – kept inside, cleaned and oiled – but it's still going to happen occasionally, especially if undue pressure is put on a spade for example. Fortunately, replacement handles are available and, using a few basic bits of equipment to fit them, the tool can be given a new lease of life.



Removing the rivet

Dan helped me replace several handles that had seen better days, and in each case he began by removing the rivet. Tools usually have a rivet, that holds the metal blade and the wooden shaft together. You need to drill out the rivet to release the broken handle, and make way for a new rivet. Holding the tool securely in a vice, mark the old rivet with a centre punch and drill away the head of the rivet. Using the punch and a hammer, knock the remainder of the rivet completely out. The old handle may come out easily, but if a broken bit remains, remove it carefully using a flat bit on a drill or an auger.

Check that the end taper on the new handle fits the metal shaft. In most cases the size and shape is fairly standard but you may need to sand the handle to shape it if not, and then push the new handle in. Twist it to line up the handle with the tool head and, with the tool end on a firm surface, tap in the handle firmly with a mallet.

Securing the handle

Measure the handle at the point of the rivet and cut the new rivet with a hacksaw so that its length will protrude by 3mm. Drill through the rivet hole and handle, and line up the new rivet. Knock the rivet head through the handle with a hammer, then turn the tool over and, supporting the head of the rivet on a solid metal base (an anvil is ideal), hit it firmly with the flat side of a ball peen hammer. Then hit it repeatedly with the ball peen end – a process known as peening the rivet. The end of the rivet mushrooms out giving you a slightly domed head that holds everything in place, sitting neatly with the surrounding metal.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Many thanks to Daniel Back for his help and advice with this feature. Dan doesn't offer a professional tool repair and maintenance service, however, he does run a gardening and design business. Visit daniel-back.com for details.

If you don't want to sharpen tools yourself, many manufacturers offer a sharpening service. Felco offers a full service for its secateurs for £19.99, felco.com. You can find equipment mentioned here at many good hardware stores, and for an extensive range of handles (of varying sizes and shapes) take a look at bulldoghandtools.co.uk

Small tools

Although the handles of some small tools can also be fitted with rivets (especially if they have a pulling action, such as a hand hoe), most are more simply held by the splaying of the metal shaft of the tool as it is firmly tapped into the handle.

Dan lost one of his favourite tools (the bronze trowel, shown above) in a client's garden for more than a year. When he finally found it, the handle had cracked. The manufacturer sent out a replacement, which was fitted by a sharp tap to the top of the handle with a mallet, while the point of the trowel was held upright on a wooden work top. □