KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Storing Hand Tools for Winter”

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You’ve prepared your garden beds for winter and taken care of the outdoor chores in preparation for cold weather. What about your hand tools? Well-maintained tools provide a cleaner cut, are more rust resistant, and last longer than tools that do not receive proper care. Now is the time to give them a thorough inspection and prepare them for a long winter’s nap.

Start by giving your tools a good cleaning; rinse tools under running water then remove any remaining soil using a cloth, scouring pad or stiff brush. Get rid of any sap that may have collected on cutting tools with soapy water, turpentine or WD40. Let your tools dry thoroughly and then inspect the handle of the tool looking to see if it is loose, cracked or splintered. Handles that are damaged are prone to break during use and may cause injury. Replace any cracked or badly splintered handles. Rough or slightly splintered wooden handles should be lightly sanded until smooth. All of your wooden handles should then be soaked in linseed, mineral, or tung oil to the point where they will not absorb any more oil. Once you have done this to all of your wooden handled tools, let them to sit and dry for approximately half an hour. Wipe off any excess oil and you are done. Doing this at the end of the gardening season ensures the wood will not dry out over the winter and that the handles will stay smoother and more flexible all summer long. Fiberglass handles will only need to be cleaned and inspected.

If you have heavy corrosion or rust on the metal parts of your tools they could be unsafe to use and should be replaced. If the damage isn’t too great it is easy to fix. You can remove rust with steel wool, emery cloth, or sandpaper. Tools like pruners with a pivot point can require a little extra care. I have found that a liberal application of WD40 and then working the tool several times will do a good job of cleaning the space that you can’t get to. Wipe off the excess, coat the rest of the metal and you are done.

Hoes, shears, scissors, knives, loppers, prunes, and shovels all need a sharpening. To maintain a sharp cutting edge on garden tools you will need a sharpening tool or stone, lubricant, fine steel wool, gloves to protect your hands, and goggles to protect your eyes. Sharpening the cutting blade removes some of the metal to restore the angle or bevel of the edge. It is important to maintain the bevel the same as when the tool was new. If you make an edge too blunt, a blade will not cut well. If you make a blade too sharp, the edge will wear prematurely. To sharpen a tool, start with a mill or flat file and progress to something finer. First, pat the file with a moist cloth. Water keeps the file from becoming clogged with tiny bits of metal removed from the blade during filing. Hold the file at the same angle as the beveled cutting edge. You can sharpen either into or away from the cutting edge. Sharpening into the edge produces a sharper edge, but increases the risk of cutting yourself as you sharpen. For increased safety, face the sharp edge of your tool away from you and stroke down the slope across the cutting edge. This will create a metal burr on the back of the tool’s cutting edge which you can remove using a light flat stroke of a file, whetstone, or sandpaper along the back of the cutting edge. A good trick used by professionals is to use a black marker and run it along the surface of the edge to be sharpened. You are finished once all of the marker has been removed. Once tools are clean, rust-free and dry, apply light oil, WD-40, silicone spray or some other rust inhibitor or to all metal surfaces.

Store your tools in a dry and protected area. A great way to store small spades and trowels is by keeping them in a tool cleaning bucket. Fill a 5-gallon bucket 4/5 full of sand and mix in enough oil to moisten the sand. A non-petroleum option is linseed oil; vegetable oils, however, will become rancid. This helps keep the metal well-conditioned. Your larger tools will do best hanging in a dry, ventilated shed.

Gardening tools are expensive. Proper tool care will make them last longer, be better for your plants, and make them easier to use.

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Resources:

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/travis/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EAGF-2017-Garden-Tool-Care.pdf>

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/benton/sites/default/files/sharpgdn_insights2012.pdf>

<https://ucanr.edu/datastoreFiles/268-723.pdf>

<https://hort.uwex.edu/articles/maintaining-lawn-and-garden-tools/>

<http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/tools-and-equipment/garden-tools.html>

<https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/mf3288.pdf>