



# Choosing Garden Tools

Garden tools are helpers, so choose the best you can afford. The wise rule applies here –you get what you pay for. In the middle of preparing a new bed, the spade or fork breaks because it was cheap. Now time and energy are wasted going for a new tool. The bed does not get dug on time for planting. And the money may not be available to buy a new tool at this moment. Here are some ideas about what to look for in tools.

Read the labels. Ask the clerk for information. Test the tool for size and weight. How does it fit your body size? Is it comfortable for your hand? Is it too long or too short? Don't buy at the first store visited. Make comparisons. Perhaps some tools will be right at one store, and others will be better at another. Have a precise list of what is needed. This is not the time to make spur of the moment choices.

Labels may use words not familiar. Forged or drop-forged means the blade or head has been formed by mechanically hammering or pressing a piece of heated bar steel. Forging allows precise shaping, producing a stronger, better-balanced tool. How is the handle fitted to the head or blade? If it is in two pieces, this joint can loosen over time with use. A solid-socket joint is where the handle and blade will be forged together.

Most labels will state the gauge of the thickness of the metal head or blade. The lower the gauge, the thicker the steel. Therefore pick the tool that has the lower gauge; for instance 14 instead of 18 gauge. The tool will last longer, not break in heavy use, and be easier to sharpen. High carbon steel is an alloy of iron and carbon. It is the best for tools because it is tough and hard and takes a sharp edge.

Check the handle. It should be a solid hardwood handle made of ash or hickory. Also it should be knot-free and straight-grained. Many inferior, brittle woods qualify as hardwood. White ash is the best wood for handles. Since wood is a natural shock absorber, it is to your advantage to have the best.

If a label states the head or blade is stamped, it means cutting and bending a piece of sheet steel to form the tool. Yes it is lighter and cheaper, but also it is weaker and less durable than forged steel.

Carbon steel alloyed with chromium and nickel produce stainless steel. These are expensive tools, but extremely rust resistant and maintenance free.

Heat-treated or tempered is a term that indicates the steel has been reheated. This process creates a tougher and less brittle head or blade. Other advantages are it is easier to sharpen and stays sharp longer.

Now that you know the terms to look for in buying tools, there are basic tools every gardener should have in stock. A *round-pointed shovel* is the most versatile. The *spade* is used for deep digging. It is shorter than a shovel and has a "D" handle. Some other useful shovels are a *square point* used for leveling and cleanup and a *transplanting spade* that has a long narrow head

When moving perennials and shrubs, using this tool creates less disturbance to the surrounding plants. "D" handles on shovels and spades are designed for close up work and quick jobs. Padding around the "D" saves hands.

*Spading forks* perform many garden tasks. Do not get a barn fork with a long handle and long angled tines, unless there are prunings, weeds, and other similar materials to move. Forks are used for tilling the soil and breaking up heavy dirt clods. They are useful in weeding large areas where there is no danger of injuring the roots of desirable plants. Remember the tines of less expensive brands may tend to bend.

Several kinds of *rakes* are available. What you buy depends on the task needed around your landscape. A *bow rake* is the traditional steel rake. It is called this because the head is connected to the handle by a steel bow at each end. The *level head rake* connects the head directly to the handle and the back of the head is straight and even. Used mainly for leveling large seedbeds, it is not a necessary tool. Another rake look-alike is the *cultivator* but it has only a few tines that are rounded and long. It is used in a chopping and pulling motion to remove shallow rooted weeds, and to break up surface soil crust around plants. If many trees are in the landscape, a *lawn rake* is needed for leaves. They may be constructed of

bamboo, metal or plastic, and may be fan shaped or rectangular. Buy what feels comfortable to you.

The conventional design of the *garden hoe* is a long handle with a flat blade set at a right angle on the end. Choose a width that accommodates your garden. Hoes are useful for many chores. Weed and groom the soil around shallow rooted plants, or chop off annual weeds and plants at ground level. A different hoe is called by various names: *Dutch hoe*, *hula hoe* or *scuffle hoe*. All perform the same task, that of pushing it ahead of you to cut the tops of annual weeds. Please remember perennial weeds must be dug and removed.

For digging in the hard desert soil a *pick and mattock* is an essential tool.

This is all one tool with two different ends. The pointed end is the pick and is used to break up clods and dig in looser soil. Use the wide blade or mattock to break up hard soil before using the pick. It chops down into the soil. Notice the cradle design of the head that can be used to break open the soil so it can be shoveled more easily.

Hand tools are essential. The *trowel* is a little shovel. There are wide heads for transplanting, narrow and long heads for planting bulbs, and other styles. Hand cultivators are essential for sit down weeding. The long headed tool with a notch at the end is good for digging down the side of tap-rooted plants. It can also be purchased with a long handle to use to weed between stepping stones or tight place.

Pruning tools are needed for any trees or shrubs in the landscape. *Pruning shears* are small with several designs. The important thing is to buy a pruner which fits your hand well and is easy to operate. If you want the ratchet type, remember they work well for larger branches, but not for your entire pruning needs. *Hedge shears* are for shaping hedges and shrubs. They can also be used to shear back ground covers and faded flower heads, but not for branches. *Lopping shears* have long handles with a small head and are designed for cutting branches an inch in diameter or smaller. The longer the handle length, the easier each cut will be. The *pruning saw* has large cutting teeth to cut through branches and limbs over an inch in diameter. The blade is curved for easier entrance to branches. Always undercut the branch before making the final top cut. This avoids damage to the bark. Only buy these tools for your landscape needs. If no trees or shrubs are on the property, you don't need the saw or lopper.

A *wheelbarrow* or a *garden cart* is a necessity in a garden of any size. Choose a wheelbarrow for your size, and the amount of work that needs to be done. Some are large and heavy for large loads and heavy work. In contrast to wheelbarrows, garden carts have two wheels, which makes them lighter. More of the load weight is supported by wheels, and are more stable. Either one can be used when screening compost from a finished pile, by placing a screen over the top. Saves your back because one does not have to bend so far.

New gardeners often skip over *garden gloves*. But they protect your hands from thorns, cuts, mud and when using tools. A *hand sprayer* is needed to apply protection against pests. A *watering can* with a fine spray head is used on newly planted seeds so they won't wash away. Again get the size that fits you. A *sharp knife*, similar to a paring knife but with a longer blade, cuts through the fine roots of seedlings when transplanting, or for cutting string when staking.

Here are some tips to keep tools in working order for many years. Always remove all of the soil from the digging tools after each use. Never put tools away wet to prevent rusting and handle rot. After each use, wipe the metal parts of pruning tools with an oily rag. Use a hone or whetstone to sharpen cutting tools. A file should be used to remove nicks and smooth the edges of shovels and trowels. For extra rust prevention, fill a five-gallon bucket with builders sand and pour a quart of new motor oil over it. Push each tool into the oily sand several times to clean and oil tools.

Hopefully this basic tool guide will help you make decisions before going to the store. There are other tools that are used on special occasions. As you gain gardening experience you will want to add to the collection.

Lois H Lockhart September 2002

References: [Ask Martha](#) column, *Arizona Daily Star*; [The Garden Helper](#), *Garden Tools*, *Internet*; [Gardening Hints & Tips](#), Pippa Greenwood; [Gardenscape 2002 Tool Catalog](#).