

Stocking the Toolshed: Hand Tools

Community and School Gardens

*David Berle and Robert Westerfield
University of Georgia Horticulturists*

When it comes to community gardening, some gardens provide only a water hose, and individual gardeners must bring their own tools. However, many community and school gardens get started with a mini-grant or donation to purchase supplies and materials. It can be difficult to know what tools are best when buying for a large number of gardeners. There are some basic guidelines that would apply to everyone. For example, poor quality garden tools do not last very long and unnecessary tools get left in the tool shed. If possible, borrow tools to get started and buy tools only when the need arises. Shop in garden catalogs for the largest selection. Consider the age and skill level of those who will be using the tools. In the world of garden tools, one size does not fit all.

Selecting the Right Tools

There are literally hundreds of different gardening tools -- some for everyday use, and some for specialized tasks. For every tool, you need to consider how it is made, the materials it's made of and physical features like weight and length. Some tools just feel better than others and without testing them all, it's difficult to know which is best. In general, smaller tools are easier for most people to handle and cause less stress to the body when used. For most gardening work, a "D" shaped handle is easier to grip than a straight handle. Handles come in different diameters. The smaller the diameter, the easier small hands can hold onto the tool. Short-handled tools encourage a better body stance, but most people are more familiar with long-handled tools. When used properly, long-handled tools require less bending, but beware of lifting heavy loads far from the body and twisting to move the load. Each tool length has a place in the garden, depending on who will be using the tool and the type of work being done.

Many tools are now made from plastic or composite materials. These are much lighter than wood or steel, but tend to be more brittle and crack from high-impact activities. Traditional wood handles absorb the shock of impact better than steel, but wood is not as strong as steel (or even heavy-duty fiberglass handles) and wood can cause splinters as it ages. However, a high-quality wood handle that is oiled and kept protected from the weather will last for years.

The connection between the handle and the "head" of the tool is more important than the handle material because this is the place where most tools fail. In general, higher quality tools have a socket fitting where the handle fits into the "head" and is held in place with bolts or rivets.

Shovels

The shovel is probably the most-used hand tool in the garden. Shovels come in all sizes and shapes. Choosing the right one depends on who is using it and the job to be done. One common mistake made is selecting a shovel that is too heavy to handle easily or too large for the task. Round point shovels are good for digging while flat shovels are good for moving materials. A good short-handled garden spade with a narrow head is excellent for

transplanting larger plants. Every garden toolshed should have at least one short-handled garden spade with a D-shaped handle, long-handled round point shovels in two different sizes, and a few long-handled flat head shovels. A short-handled coal shovel is also very useful for moving mulch, but will not be used as often as the others.

Rakes

There are basically two different types of rakes: an iron rake (bow rake or garden rake) for grooming and smoothing, and a leaf rake for raking leaves. Most community and school gardens will likely use a bow rake more frequently and it would be less likely to break. A well-stocked toolshed should have one leaf rake and at least two bow rakes, preferably with flat teeth.

Trowels

A trowel is a small shovel you hold in your hand. Trowels are very useful for planting vegetable transplants and digging weeds. The handle of a trowel should be easy to grip (not too thick) and the head of the trowel should be secure (not two-piece construction). Foam handles are more comfortable. Trowels with a narrow head are easier to use than those with a wide head. Many trowels advertised as “ergonomic” are actually uncomfortable to use and very expensive. The average community or school garden should have at least four to six trowels in at least two different handgrip sizes.

Hand Pruners

There are so many different types of hand pruners that it is hard to describe them all. Hand pruners will be used frequently in the garden, and many times not for their intended purpose. Hand pruners are built to prune or cut back plants, but can also be used for harvesting crops like peppers, eggplant and okra. Buy several pairs of pruners in two different sizes. Consider buying a few high-quality pruners for pruning woody plants and several inexpensive ones for the everyday tasks. Two-handed pruners, called loppers, will come in handy for cutting down corn stalks and larger plants. Follow these additional guidelines for purchasing hand pruners.

- With hand pruners, the expression “you get what you pay for” is very accurate.
- A bypass pruner (the blades work like a scissors) is preferred over an anvil type pruner.
- A pruner with replaceable parts is nice but tends to cost considerably more.
- Buy pruners with small handle grips for small hands. A larger hand can use a smaller grip, but a smaller hand cannot use a larger grip.
- The mechanism to keep the pruners closed should be easy to operate.
- The spring to open the pruners should be attached firmly to the handle.
- Ratcheting type pruners are sometimes found at garden centers. The handle is squeezed multiple times as the blade slowly cuts through; however, they require too much repetitive handwork to be worthwhile.

Gloves

Pigskin leather is the best overall material for work gloves for many reasons. However, leather gloves tend to cost more and are harder to wash and clean. Leather also gets stiff after getting wet or cold. Newer-style gloves use synthetic leather or combine leather with tough nylon materials. These cost a little more but last longer. Brown cloth gloves are very cheap, but allow no gripping of tools and provide no protection from thorns. Cheap suede leather gloves with canvas cuffs are commonly available, but they provide limited dexterity and can rip or tear easily. Knit gloves, like the brown cloth gloves, are slippery and provide limited protection from punctures. At some garden centers and building supply stores you can find knit gloves with a rubberized coating on the palm side. These are very inexpensive, provide some puncture protection, allow some gripping of tools, and can be washed.

Children's Tools

Children's tools are often made of lightweight materials and poorly constructed. It is hard to find good quality, long lasting tools that fit the small hands of children, especially very young children. Hand trowels are generally a safe bet, as are small sized, short-handled shovels and bow rakes. These are easily found at garden centers. Leaf rakes for kids are generally too flimsy and used infrequently. Remember, kids' tools often get left outside, so look for aluminum or fiberglass handles.

Carts and Wheelbarrows

The consumer options for a garden cart have increased dramatically over the last 10 years. The decision for which cart to purchase will depend on both the intended use and budget. Keep the following points in mind when shopping for a wheelbarrow or cart:

- Unless designed well, a cart made of plastic will not hold up. Wood handles and frames will break down over time, especially if kept outdoors.
- Large tires roll more easily on uneven ground. Look for puncture-resistant tires, or better yet, airless tires.
- Carts do not tip and hold a lot of material, but are not good for heavy loads.
- Wheelbarrows tip easily (especially with children) and require strength to maneuver, but carry heavy loads well.

Tool Quantities

For big workdays at community or school gardens it is tempting to purchase large quantities of tools. To avoid extra expense, it is best to consider what type of work is planned and how many people will actually be using each tool. Items like gloves will be needed for everyone. Other tools, like shovels and trowels, will be used, but you don't need one for each person. Four people can keep one wheelbarrow busy, but if you have a lot of mulch to move and 20 people helping, you will need at least five or six. For an event like this, it is best to purchase one or two for normal use and borrow others to handle the large number of volunteers. This is when local tool loan programs can be very helpful.

