



# Tools of THE trade

Quality tools are the key to a thriving garden

BY GORDON CRAIGIE

IT'S WELL KNOWN that the British love their gardens, but the Horticultural Trades Association ([hta.org.uk](http://hta.org.uk)) gives a sense of the scope of this affection. It estimates the UK consumer garden market brings in sales of more than £1.6 billion annually, attributing about half that figure to garden tools alone. With so many tools out there, it makes sense to shop wisely and then protect your investment.

Oxford-based Fred Walden ([fredshed.com](http://fredshed.com)), a professional tool tester and researcher, tells *The Connection*, "The tools you need will depend on the style of garden you have and the plants that you choose to grow." Guy Barter, chief horticultural adviser at the Royal Horticultural Society ([rhs.org.uk](http://rhs.org.uk)), agrees. "You could get away with just a spade," he says, "but life is very much easier if you can also run to a fork, a hoe, a trowel and a bucket."

Other gardeners say knives, secateurs, hedge shears, a saw, a watering can, a broom and a wheelbarrow are essential. It all depends on how much foliage you have to deal with and the condition of your garden.

## Points to ponder

Experts agree that the key factors to consider when choosing garden tools are quality, size and weight. "Choose stainless steel tools of good quality, make sure the

handle length suits you, choose light but not flimsy and remember that balance is important," Barter recommends, adding that well-built garden tools should last a lifetime if looked after properly.

While your budget is a valid concern, don't be duped into buying the latest thing. "Buy tried-and-tested tools for the job, the same ones professionals use," Alasdair

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Hood, curator of the University of Dundee Botanic Garden ([dundee.ac.uk/botanic](http://dundee.ac.uk/botanic)), advises. Walden reinforces this, warning, "Don't buy gadgets and multipurpose tools. It is much better to stick to tried-and-tested tools, and have a simple tool that does a specific job."

## A cutting edge

Well-made tools are a joy to use and can last for ages, but regular maintenance is essential to achieve that longevity. "Most cutting tools will require occasional sharpening. If you neglect this and use a blunt tool, you will damage the plant, the tool and possibly yourself," Walden says.

Barter concurs, adding, "Sharpening tools is a good rainy-day chore, and sharp tools are safer, as they don't slip and leap about. It's also worth sharpening spades and hoes each winter." He views this as a straightforward DIY job, using either a file or a grinding wheel attached to an electric

drill, and recommends YouTube videos as a great source of advice.

## Sort out your situation

In addition to the basics, many gardeners may require specialist equipment. When former B & Q Garden Centre manager Stuart Mackie moved from a terraced townhouse in Perth to a converted farmhouse with an acre of garden ground in Fife, he found many of his treasured tools to be inadequate.

"The garden hadn't been touched for at least five years," he says. "A good chainsaw was my first essential purchase, followed by ratcheted, expandable loppers. Also, my old mower wouldn't look at our area of grass!"

If you've got a small area of grass, with a nearby electrical outlet, then an electric mower on a cord is a cheap and practical option, Barter says. "If the cord is going to be a nuisance, then battery-powered mowers are a quiet and economical solution, but once you get on to a big lawn, then you need a motor mower."

With all mowers, he says, it's always a good idea to buy the widest cutting deck that is sensible, as having a few extra inches saves a lot of time pushing a mower across a lawn. For maintenance, he notes, cylinder lawn mowers need to be sent away to a specialist to sharpen the blades, and any garden machinery shop can arrange that for you, but rotary mowers you can sharpen yourself with a file.

## Cleanliness counts

Hood stresses the importance of cleaning, drying and storing your tools. "Apart from prolonging the life of the tools and making them easier to use, proper cleaning and storage reduces the risk of spreading pests and disease," he says.

Cleaning garden tools is not difficult. Simply scrape or wire-brush away any soil or mud and ensure the tools are dry before storing them safely in a dry place. "You don't need a shed—any dry place will do—but if you have small children make sure they cannot gain access to anything sharp or heavy," Walden says. Barter adds, "Tools don't appreciate being left outside in the garden."

Quality garden tools that are properly maintained and stored are easier to use and should last you a lifetime. As Hood concludes, "If you break a good tool, then you're using it wrongly." Happy gardening! **C**

Gordon Craigie is a Dundee-based writer.

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