

Winterizing Your Garden Tools

Master Gardeners Journal - Julia Bender - Master Gardener Volunteer



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Let's face it, after a long growing season, your garden tools have been through a lot. They've helped you plant, prune, dig, and harvest, and now they deserve some TLC before their winter rest. Think of this as a spa day for your trusted garden companions!

You might be tempted to just toss your tools in the shed and call it a day, but dirty tools are like a bed and breakfast for plant diseases and fungi. By cleaning them now, you're doing your future garden a huge favor. Plus, there's nothing worse than trying to prune with dull shears or dig with a rusty spade.

Well-maintained tools just work better, making your gardening life so much easier. And let's talk about your wallet: Quality garden tools aren't cheap, but treat them right and they'll serve you faithfully for years to come.

Step 1 - Initial Cleaning

Start with a good rinse. Just like you wouldn't go to bed with dirt on your face, don't put your tools away dirty! A quick spray with the garden hose will get rid of the loose stuff. For the stubborn grime (we all have that one trowel that looks like it's been through a mud war), here's what you can do:

Fill a 5-gallon bucket with water, add a squirt of dish soap (about a tablespoon), and let your tools soak for 15-20 minutes. Think of it as a relaxing bubble bath for your garden gear! For really stubborn dirt, here's a neat trick: Make a paste with equal parts baking soda and water. It's like an exfoliating scrub for your tools!

Step 2 - Disinfect

Now that they're clean, let's tackle any lingering nasties. You've got three options here:

1. **The powerful approach:** Mix up a solution of 9 parts water to 1 part bleach. But remember, bleach and vinegar are like feuding relatives; never mix them together!
2. **The gentle approach:** Plain white vinegar. It's safer if you've got kids or pets around, and — bonus — it helps with rust too!
3. **The quick and easy approach:** Isopropyl alcohol is like the hand sanitizer of the garden tool world. It evaporates super quickly, which means no waiting around for tools to dry fully, and it's great for those quick clean-ups between pruning different plants.

Each of these methods work great. Just pour the solution into a bucket and dip your tools in or fill up a spray bottle and spray your tools thoroughly. Either way, make sure they are good and dry afterward.

Step 3 - Dealing with Rust

Got some rust? No worries! Mix up a gallon of white vinegar with a cup of salt — it's like a rust-busting spa treatment. Let your tools soak anywhere from 30 minutes to overnight, depending on how stubborn that rust is. Then scrub them clean and dry thoroughly.

Step 4 - Sharpen Up!

For your **pruners and shears**, a sharp blade means clean cuts that help your plants heal better. Think of it as plant first aid! Use a file or sharpener that fits your blade size. Here's a great video from the UC Master Gardeners of Sacramento that shows you how easy it is to do:

<https://youtu.be/k9AddV33lpw?si=TZgGFqt9FoHn5vGo>

For your **digging tools**, you don't need them razor-sharp (they're not preparing for battle!), but a good edge makes a world of difference. Just run a flat file over the edge in one direction — like petting a cat, not back and forth. Here's a great video from Mississippi State University Extension on doing this:

<https://youtu.be/9pEved9S9Mc?si=ZNcCyYpNrdorMGOD>

Step 5 - Show Handles Some Love

Don't forget about the handles — they're the unsung heroes of your garden tools. For wooden handles, smooth out any rough spots that might give you splinters (ouch!) with sandpaper or steel wool. For metal ones, give them a once-over with steel wool to keep rust at bay.

Step 6 - Oil Is Your Friend

Think of oil as sunscreen for your tools: It protects them from the elements. Give all metal parts a light coating using any oil you have handy. You can use natural oils like mineral, linseed, teak or vegetable, which will be better for your plants and the environment than petroleum-based oils. For wooden handles, the oil prevents them from drying out and cracking — nobody wants a handle that feels like sandpaper! Just pour a bit of oil on a clean rag and rub it all over the surface of the handle.

Step 7 - Home Sweet Home:

Finally, find your tools a cozy winter home. A few golden rules:

- Keep them out of the weather (they've earned their winter break!).
- Hang them up if you can. Leaning tools can get warped like a vinyl record left in the sun.
- Keep them off the ground. Think of the floor as a cold, damp enemy to your tool's well-being.

There you have it! Sure, it might seem like a lot of work now, but come spring, you'll thank yourself when you reach for that perfectly maintained pruner or that rust-free spade. Your tools work hard for you all season. Showing them a little love now means they'll be ready to help you create garden magic next year!