

Gardening 101 Lesson Eight – Tools and How to Use them

Gardening requires tools – something to dig with, something to plant with, something to gather and spread stuff, something to trim or cut with, and something to weed with. Exactly what tools are needed depends on the type of gardening that's being done but here's a basic list of tools most gardeners need.

1. **Digging.** There are shovels and there are spades, both of which are useful for digging and spreading stuff such as dirt or mulch or gravel around. Shovels have squarish heads while spades are more pointed. A shovel will move more dirt at one time but a spade will generally be easier to push into the ground. A nice compromise, especially in a small garden which already has plants in it, is a transplant spade which allows you to dig in small spaces. Get a digging tool which is suited to your height and strength to improve the leverage you can exert and to spare your back.
2. **Planting.** For large plants, spades or shovels can be used to dig the large holes needed but for smaller plants, a hand trowel works well. These come in various widths, lengths, and types of handles so you can choose one which is comfortable for your hand and easy to insert into the earth. They also work well for transplanting smaller specimens. For vegetable beds and even some flower beds, a hoe will help you break up the earth and make planting small plants easier.
3. **Gathering/Spreading.** Most gardeners will need a rake to deal with the fall leaves; best for this purpose are the fan style ones which allow you to gather a large number of leaves and use in lifting the leaves into containers. An adjustable fan rake or hand rake will allow you to rake leaves from tight spaces in garden beds but fan rakes don't work too well at leveling soil or removing stones; a stiff metal toothed one works well for this. A wheelbarrow is handy for moving soil, gravel, bags of stuff and leaves around but there are also lots of light, collapsible plastic bags with handles which work well too. Wheelbarrows hold more but are heavier, more expensive and need more storage room.
4. **Trimming/Cutting** – plants and lawn. Pruning plants is a necessary gardening chore and there are a myriad of different cutting tools to help you. Generally you can get by with a medium-sized pruner for most jobs. Just be sure that it fits your hand and is comfortable; otherwise blisters will result. A pruning saw is useful for trimming branches on shrubs and trees. If you have a small or medium sized lawn, a hand powered lawn mower is the best – non-polluting and gives a neater cut. If you have a larger lawn, an electric mower is much less polluting than a gas model but you'll need a long enough power cord to reach all parts of the lawn. Be careful not to run it over!
5. **Weeding.** There's no end of nifty weeding tools available – Dutch hoes with long handles let you quickly cut weed roots just under the ground level by pushing the tool away from you while standing upright but sometimes you have to get down on your hands and knees to get at weeds. For this, I like a gizmo called a "Bandit" but other gardeners swear by the Ho-Mi Digger. Even a simple hand trowel will work well to loosen soil and let you hand-pull a weed.

General Considerations

Buying as good quality tools as you can afford makes great sense because, in general, the better the tool is, the easier the gardening is. There's no economy to be gained in buying a cheaper shovel, for instance, if it means that the head is likely to fall off easily. Similarly, one made from stainless steel will not require the same amount of cleaning and sharpening as one made from a metal prone to rusting.

Using the right size of tool is important, too. There's a big difference between a rake which suits a six foot plus person and one which can be easily and effectively used by a five-footer. If there's more than one person in the garden and sizes vary, look for tools which can be adjusted in length and width whenever possible. Many gardening chores involve repetitive motion so always consider good ergonomic design; it'll save the body from needless strain. At the very least, choose a tool which doesn't feel heavy in the hand.

Keep your tools clean when not in use and keep the edges sharp.

Here's the voice of experience – tools with brightly coloured handles are harder to lose in the garden.

There are other tools which a gardener might use, of course; just take a look at the annual Lee Valley Tools Gardening catalogue. There literally seems to be no end to the wonderful gardening aids the human mind can invent and no end to the amount of money which can be spent on them.