

HOME & GARDEN

Garden tools make handy holiday gifts

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
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Every worker needs his tools. The cook needs pots, pans, whisks and spoons; the plumber needs wrenches and snakes; and the carpenter needs hammers, saws and plumb lines. The gardener, too, needs tools.

Certainly a garden spade is the first necessity. Without it, no new plot of soil could be turned and planted. Next in importance might be a heavy metal garden rake for grading and smoothing a planting bed.

While a gardener can do a lot with just these two tools, it does not take long to realize that a few extra items will provide more help. There have been times in my gardening career when I have been reduced to grabbing a kitchen spoon and dashing out to put in my transplants. But there really can be no argument: having the right tool can make a job easier to do, and you can also do it better. With Christmas upon us, I'd like to talk about a few ordinary tools that can make gardening easier.

Hand tools really are necessary. Because I spend a lot of time in the garden on my hands and knees, weeding, transplanting and supplicating the gods, I use hand tools heavily. Cheap hand tools are easy to come by, and they are perfectly adequate for a season or two — if they don't bend in half — but a well-made tool really is a joy to hold and work with.

A trowel is basic and comes in many sizes and weights so you are sure to find one to suit you. The blades will be wider or shorter depending on your preference, and the handles come in a variety of materials. Some are made of wood, some have rubber hand grips, and some hand tools are made all of a single piece of stainless steel. These last have extra advantages because they are fairly easy to spot

when they get left out in the garden after a bout of weeding, and they are almost impervious to the weather.

In addition to a hand trowel, a small hand fork is also useful when you're working in the flower border or transplanting seedlings.

Since I do a great deal of weeding on my hands and knees, one of my favorite tools is a hand cultivator. Mine has five prongs, but many people prefer a three-prong type.

Because there are so many hand tools available at garden centers or through catalogs, it is important to look at the construction carefully. It should be strong enough so that the blade or working end of the tool will not bend back the handle, and it should have a comfortable grip.

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There are a couple of other hand tools that come in very handy. Many people find a Cape Cod weeder indispensable. It has an L-shaped metal blade attached to a handle. It weeds and cultivates, cutting the weed from its root just below the soil level.

Another simple tool is the "dibble." It comes with a T or curved handle. The tool itself is merely a metal sheathed wooden cone that can be plunged

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into prepared soil to make just the right-sized planting hole for transplants or small bulbs.

Pruning shears are important. They should be strong and sharp enough to cut branches cleanly without pinching or splintering, which can encourage disease. Many pruning shears are described by an indication of the diameter of the wood they can cut, usually one-half or three-fourths of an inch.

For wood that is too large to be handled with pruning shears there are garden saws. I have my eye on a small Fanno garden saw listed in the Smith and Hawken garden tool catalog. It has an 8½-inch handle and a 7-inch blade. It is described as being perfect for pruning small shrubs.

For pruning trees, like those in my dwarf fruit orchard, Fanno makes another pruning saw with a 13-inch blade.

One of the more tedious jobs around the flower garden is keeping the lawn from invading the flower beds. The lawn edger has been invented for just this purpose. It is very simple, just a sharp metal hemisphere attached to a handle. Push it into the ground with your foot, angle the handle towards you, pick up the bit of turf and throw it in your compost pile.

Between edgings, the grass will probably have to be trimmed by hand with grass clippers. I can never trust anyone to cut the grass close enough without harming the flowers, and my clippers have become essential.

While not strictly a tool, corrugated flexible metal edging is another way to keep the lawn within bounds. This can also be used to contain invasive

herbs like the mints.

I don't know that I'll get them this Christmas, but I have been admiring the "border spade and fork" in the Smith and Hawken catalog. These tools are fairly small. The handles are 28 inches long, and the flat bladed shovel and the fork head measure only 5½ by 9 inches. You would not use them to turn over new sod, but they are perfect for working in the flower garden, digging up and dividing perennials.

A big bag of potting soil is always welcome, as are plastic or cardboard flats for starting seeds in the spring.

In addition, there are a number of small things that make good stocking stuffers: a ball of twine for marking out garden beds, a thermometer, a rain gauge and a small garden notebook for recording vital weather statistics and planting and harvesting dates.

Finally, an extra special gift that mostly requires some time and a little labor is the setting up of a potting or supply corner — a place where tools can be hung and the pots, fertilizer and potting soil stored. All jobs become easier if the tools and equipment are at hand, and a frustrating hour doesn't have to be spent searching for the bonemeal or pruning shears.

Many of the items I've mentioned here can be found at local garden supply centers, but you also might like to browse through supply catalogs such as the following:

Smith and Hawken
68 Homer
Palo Alto, Calif. 94301
A. M. Leonard Inc.
6665 Spiker Road
Piqua, Ohio 45356