

TOOLS

Tool Selection & Purchase

To be easy on your body, and put out far less energy gardening, let your tools do much of the work for you! Use the right tool for the job.

A tool usually comes in several shapes and styles, to provide for particular uses. Tools vary in design, weight and size. Get tools that are reasonably lightweight and balanced, but have heavier steel heads. 'Try a new tool out' in the store, and handle it as if you were using it in your garden. Take your time to explore and choose well – the right tool will 'feel right' to you, as well as fit your criteria. Don't hesitate to ask for shop assistant help. If they don't know something, ask them to look in their tool catalogue. Take this information with you, and let them know your needs.

Here are some guidelines for selecting the right tools for your body type and your garden needs. Check that:

- ✓ the tool **handle** is a comfortable length for your body, and is solidly attached – decide on a wooden, plastic or metal handle
- ✓ the **blade** length, width and shape is the one which is right for your needs
- ✓ the **welding joint** is strong, and not done where the tool blade meets the stem at the narrowest point – the best blades (but the most expensive tools) are where the blade and stem are cast as one unit
- ✓ for **digging tools** – the top of the blade is rolled over into a good **lip**, so that you can press down hard with your foot without pain

Tips

Blades: The blades of tools sitting in a shop are mostly blunt, and will need sharpening before use. An indicator of steel quality: the slower the stone or file cuts the metal, the better the steel is likely to be. If the metal stone/ file cuts rapidly with little pressure applied, the steel is soft and will rapidly get dull with use.

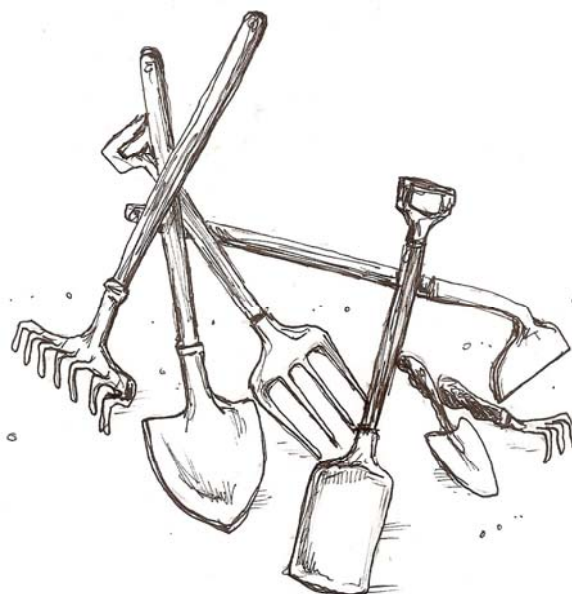
Handles: Metal handles are cold to the touch and can break easily at joints if made of flimsy steel (experiment with tapping different metal handles in the shop, the stronger ones 'ring' differently). Plastic handles can be sturdy enough, but wooden handles are generally the best as they are durable and have some 'spring' in them. Hickory is the best and most common kind of handle wood, but if you break a handle, some of our native timbers make great handles. Try *ake ake*, *lancewood* and *manuka*.

Secondhand tools: These days, blades are made with steel of lower-quality and quantity than in days-gone-by. Keep your eyes open in

secondhand stores, garage sales and auctions. These are the best sources of good long-lasting tools – likely to be quite cheap too. Check that the blade doesn't have cracks/ fractures in it – if it does, then its life is over.

BASIC TOOLS

- shovel
- spade
- fork
- rake
- 'chop' hoe
- 'push' hoe
- wheelbarrow
- hand-trowel
- hand-fork



Specific Tools

Shovels:

Type 1: Broad and deeply curved blade, to hold a lot (like a soup spoon), without a lip on the edge for a foot to push down onto. This shovel is designed to move piles of loose material from one place to another (eg a heap of sand into a wheelbarrow), by thrusting it into a heap using your upper body strength, thereby lifting large quantities of soft material. This shovel is not designed for digging into the earth.

Type 2: Broad, more open blade, with a 'rolled lip' on the top, for supporting a boot to press down on it as it pushes into the earth. If you only get one shovel, this is the kind you will want.

Spades: Designed to dig straight down and loosen compact soil. By using just one foot on the spade's lip, a person's whole body weight is transferred through the blade so that it can penetrate hard earth with the least force. Usually, the 30cm-deep blade is only 15–20cm wide, so it doesn't require much body weight to push it into the earth. This flat, narrow blade doesn't make it the best tool for turning over or moving earth – a shovel is better for that. However, spade blades come in different curvatures and lengths – curved, narrow and long with a rounded or peaked point (for heavy clay soils/tree planting), to flatter short blades with straight ends.

For general-purpose use, select one with a medium-sized blade (no less than 25cm), slight curvature, and straight end. NB: Short-handled shovels and spades are for short people (under 1.5mtrs tall).

Forks: For loosening up soil, and rapidly turning soil. Great for lighter soils, not good on heavy soil, which can bend the 'tines'. A short-tined fork is fine for surface weeding and light turning, but generally, longer-tined forks are more useful. The longer the tines, the deeper the soil penetration. If you have 'couchgrass/twitch' in your garden, get a long-tined fork, as you'll likely need to deal with it for a while.

Rakes: Come in 'bow' or 'T' shapes. Both are good, but the 'bow' style has better balance. The rake-handle should be long and slender, because the lighter the rake, the less your arms will tire. The head of the rake should be at least 30cm and no more than 40cm wide, for less back-forth pushing, and with teeth no longer than 5cm.

Hoes:

'Chop or Cultivating Hoe' – a rectangular blade attached to a 'swans neck', bent so that the blade is parallel to the soil when the handle is held in a comfortable position when you stand upright. This angle is to rapidly and easily cut off weeds just below the soil surface, whilst loosening the soil. This is done by pulling the blade towards you approximately 1cm under the surface.

You can also use the corner of the blade to chop out resistant clumps of grass and large weeds, make furrows for planting into, and weed compact soil, including paths.

'Push-pull Hoe' – an elongated-oval-shaped blade with a sharp point at both ends. This works by gliding back and forth through soft cultivated soil, cutting weeds off just below the surface on both push and pull strokes. The two most common shapes are the 'stirrup' (or 'hula hoe') and the 'torpedo' (or 'propeller' or 'glide & groom') hoe.

Hand tools: A hand-trowel and hand-fork are good for close-to-ground work (eg planting seedlings, weeding between plants) and are also suitable for children.

Other excellent hand-tools (but less common and harder to get hold of) are: angle-weeder (niwashi), sickle, kama (Japanese sickle) and handgrubber.

Wheelbarrows: There are 3 types:

- *Contractors'* – narrow and deep, and often has a pouring lip. This is designed for carrying and tipping out 'slopping around' materials (eg cement, sand).
- *General purpose* – wide and shallow, for carrying all kinds of materials, from seedling trays to compost – great for small gardens
- *Mid-range* – looks more like a contractors' type, but is wider and bigger – suitable for larger gardens.

The 'general purpose type' of wheelbarrow should serve all the needs of a suburban home gardener. Try them all out in the shop (ie wheel them around). The handles should be high enough for your body so that when you lift them and hold the 'barrel' so it just starts to tip forward, your arms are only slightly bent at the elbows and your back is nearly straight. There should be room for you to stand between the handles and walk forward without risking your knees.

Legs & Trays/Barrels: Check that the barrow's legs are sturdy. Usually the cheaper the barrow, the more flimsy the legs, and it won't last long. Heavy plastic trays often last longer than steel, which will rust. Best to get a barrow that doesn't have bolts in the barrel/tray itself, as they can pull through over time, separating the barrow from its steel frame. If you do get this type, buy it unassembled, so that you can put a washer on either side of the bolts when you put it together.

Wheels & Tyres: The best barrows have a wheel with a broad pneumatic tyre (with an inner tube) on a steel rim, turning on ball-bearings. The tyre can be repaired if it punctures, and blown up to full capacity with a foot or hand pump from time to time.

Loading & Pushing: When you use your wheelbarrow, to make pushing it much easier on you, load it so that most of the weight is at the end farthest from the handles, and that the left/right weight is balanced. Test this out before you set off on your journey. If it's balanced well, you can stack a wheelbarrow quite high and not have things topple off.

Tool Care

Clean your tools after use, removing dirt with a wirebrush, or a strong scrubbing brush and water, then dry them in the sun. Keep your tools in a non-moist environment to prevent rusting.

Keep blades reasonably sharp – either check the cutting blades before or after use and sharpen them then, or make it a practice to check and sharpen all your tools on a regular basis eg monthly, marking these days on your calendar.

At the same time, if you have wooden handles, oil them with boiled linseed oil or coconut oil on a soft rag. It's a good opportunity to also oil the steel with mineral/machine oil (eg used diesel/crankcase oil). Another way is to have a

permanent set-up with a drum of coarse sand with mineral oil mixed into it, and 'plunge' your tool-blades into this after each cleaning.

Remember, your tool is like a best friend, and if taken care of, can last a lifetime.

Sharpening Tools

(info and illustration to come)