

TWIST DON'T SHOUT

Americans are tough. We skydive, we mountain bike, we haul our kids and their friends to the mall and the pizza parlor and live to tell about it. The last thing we need in our busy lives is to pull a muscle or tweak a ligament when puttering in the garden. But instead of ignoring the pain or pretending the weeds will go away on their own, wouldn't it be nice to have the know-how to make gardening chores easier? By choosing the right tools and using them properly, you'll be able to make gardening more fun—and more productive, too.

The Right Stuff

The first step to pain-free gardening is having the right tool for the job. Many garden tools are now available in ergonomic designs. "Ergonomic" is just a fancy way of saying the tools are designed to be more efficient, more comfortable and safer to use. Sometimes something as simple as a cushioned grip or a curved handle will make all the difference in the world to your comfort.

Digging. The shovel is the workhorse of the garden, so be sure to get the highest-quality tool you can afford. But this doesn't necessarily mean the largest or the heaviest. Bigger isn't better; you'll have an easier time using a tool that fits your height. Ergonomic designs are available, or you can add a clamp-on "D" handle for extra leverage. Also consider adding foam or rubber padding to your handle for a comfortable, no-slip, no-blister grip.

Planting. The tool of choice for planting small annuals and veggies is often a trowel. These are now available with long handles so you can use them standing up. You could also use PVC pipe to extend the handle of a trowel you already own. Another option is special



ergonomically designed versions that take the strain off your wrist and utilize the strength in your arm to do the work instead.

Also remember that just because you can get down on the ground to plant, it doesn't mean your body appreciates it. There's nothing wrong with using a seat or garden kneeler to take a load off your back and knees while you work in the garden.

Weeding and Aerating. A hand cultivator is a great garden tool, but sometimes getting down on your hands and knees to use one is just too painful. A good alternative is a long-handled cultivator or "shuffle hoe" that's compact enough to get between and under plants, but has a long handle to save your back. You could also adapt the one you already own with a length of PVC pipe.

Raking leaves. Metal is traditional, durable and long lasting, but plastic is light and flexible. And plastic leaf rakes are often larger (for more raking efficiency) than their metal counterparts. Some pros such as Roger Cook from This Old House even prefer plastic leaf rakes for commercial use.



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

Excessive bending can be a problem for your back as well as your rake, but there are several new designs available that help ease the strain. Some act as a scoop when you turn them over, to help you pick up your leaf pile without bending. Others have a lever-operated mechanism that grabs the leaves for you to make it easy to put them into a trash can or bag. And don't forget a narrow rake for maneuvering around shrubs, so you don't have to get down on your knees to fish out debris.

Cutting and Pruning. Hand pruners are now available with ergonomically designed rotating handles that maximize the strength in your hand. And some loppers (for larger limbs) now have special gear-action designs that increase your cutting power while reducing effort. Consider loppers with extendable handles so you don't have to stretch or bend excessively to access out-of-reach branches.

Moving and Lifting. Traditional wheelbarrows place a lot of strain on the back, especially as you struggle to keep them from tipping from side to side. Consider a two-wheeled wheelbarrow or a four-wheeled wagon instead—they take up almost no more space in the garage or shed, and yet can be one of the biggest time- and back-saving tool changes you can make.

Try them on for size. In addition to having the right tool for the job, you also need the right tool for *you*. When you're at the store, take the tool off the shelf. The tool's handle should feel good in your hands and be about the same diameter as the circle you can make between your thumb and index finger. Then go through the motions of using the tool. Make sure you aren't hunching over to use it, if you are, select a different size. Don't pay attention to the guy next to you stifling a laugh. Just revel in the silent satisfaction of knowing that you're buying the right tool, while he'll probably end up buying a backache.

Sharp shape

Caked-on dirt and rust can make tools less efficient, meaning you have to work harder. Take the time to keep your tools well-maintained and let them do the work instead. Other than a basic cleaning after each use, you really only need to tend to your tools once a year. A good time to do this yearly maintenance is before you put them away for the winter. The care you give them at this time will help prevent corrosion and rust during the winter months and will ensure that, come spring, they're ready to go when you are.

Tools, especially pruners and loppers, should be kept clean throughout the gardening season.

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Keep a can of WD-40 or other penetrating lubricant handy and give them a quick shot after each use. When it comes time to really clean them up, use soapy water or turpentine to remove any sap. Check the blades for nicks, and if they don't cut as easily as they did when new, either sharpen them yourself (if you feel up to the challenge), get them professionally sharpened, or replace the blades (if replaceable). Give the metal surfaces a shot of penetrating oil and a quick wipe with a rag and they'll be set until next time.

To care for shovels and spades, first remove any accumulated dirt with soapy water and a stiff brush. Next use a file (don't forget your gloves) to sharpen the digging edge to a 45-degree bevel (you'll be amazed at how much better a sharp shovel will cut through soil and roots). Then give the metal a coat of oil (motor oil, WD-40 or even vegetable oil will work) to prevent corrosion in the off-season. Clean wood handles and sand any rough spots to prevent splinters. Make sure to give all your tools a thorough once-over to check for loose screws and bolts. Taking the time to tighten any loose parts and oil any moving parts will keep your tools in great shape.

Caring for your moving parts

You can buy all the ergonomically designed garden tools ever made and keep them in perfect condition, but you're wasting your time if you don't pay attention to your body while you garden.

Always begin with a warm-up to ease your body into gardening. You can take a short, brisk walk or do a few yoga moves ... whatever you want that will limber your body for the work ahead.

Never stay in one position for a long period of time. The tendency is to hit the ground and stay down until the job is done. This attitude wreaks havoc on muscles and joints. A lot of pain can be avoided simply by switching it up. Change position often to spread the work out over different muscles ... they'll thank you in the morning.

Changing tasks frequently can also help fight muscle fatigue. Switch your chores up by, for example, weeding for a little while, then tackling some pruning and then some planting before going back to weeding.

And take a break. Every 20 minutes or so make sure to stop what you're doing and stretch for a minute. Repeat those warm-up exercises or walk inside for a drink of water.

The hydration will do you good and the break will be welcomed by your weary muscles. ♻️

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