

Cleaning and sharpening garden tools

All tools should be kept in a dry place with an airflow so that they dry out after use.

1. Large cultivation tools (spades, forks, etc)

Clean lightly-muddy tools with a scrubbing brush. If necessary (and for dried-on mud) use a scrubbing brush in a bucket of soapy water. Then dry them before brushing with an oil like linseed oil (on both the metal and any wooden handles).

After cleaning, if there is surface rust, remove it with a (medium-sized) wire brush, or a wire brush attachment on a power drill, for speed. Then brush with oil.

Stainless steel tools are more expensive and rust much less, but still need cleaning and (in my opinion) oiling.

Occasionally, well-used spades, hoes and other cutting tools will need their edge sharpening, or to remove burrs (small bent pieces of metal on the edge). Clamp the tool in a vice and use a whetstone (a stone designed for sharpening) or metal file on the edge. Scrape the whetstone across the edge, pushing away from the edge, on both sides. Then oil.

2. Cleaning and sharpening cutting tools

Muddy knives and secateurs may need washing first, but otherwise avoid using water - cutting tools are best kept dry. In use, secateurs, loppers and shears accumulate plant sap on the blades, which needs to be removed with wire wool and a little oil, or a wire brush if necessary. Once they are clean they can be sharpened.

Experienced tool-sharpeners could dismantle secateurs or shears (where this is possible) before sharpening the blade(s) but generally they can be sharpened without dismantling. It is very helpful to be able to clamp them in a vice on a workbench but, if you don't have one, with care it can be done on a flat surface like a table.

To sharpen an edge you need something to scrape against it. A metal file is possible, if it is fine enough. Diamond-coated sharpening blocks and files are expensive and an unnecessary expense for most gardeners. Traditionally a whetstone is used - a stone tool for sharpening, often with one side smoother than the other. It can be a block of stone to sit on a flat surface or it can be shaped to be held in the hand, which also makes it possible to use in the garden, sharpening a tool occasionally when it is in prolonged use. (For example, a scythe needs to be sharpened every few minutes when in use.) I use whetstones, a flat one the bench that uses a drop of oil for lubrication, and one designed for use in the hand, used dry in the garden.

If the tool or the hinge bolt is stiff, use a spray like WD-40 to loosen it (other brands are available, and cheaper) but not to lubricate the hinge at the end of the process, when 3-in-1 oil is better.

Secateurs usually have one blade that slices past an anvil. The anvil should be cleaned but not sharpened. The blade cutting edge is flat on one side and has an angle of about 30 degrees on the other - this is the side to sharpen first. Using the whetstone, scrape it lightly across the edge, at the same angle (30 degrees) as the blade edge, and all along the length of the cutting edge. Finally, lightly file the flat surface with the whetstone to make sure the edge is flat. Wipe it clean.

If the tool was dismantled, put it back together. Tighten the bolt so that the blade slides against the anvil smoothly, with no 'play'. Finally, add a drop of 3-in-1 oil to the hinge for lubrication and the to blade, and close the tool (secateurs have a lock).

Shears are similar and larger, with two blades. Clean and sharpen both blades as with secateur blades.

Scythes and sickles have one blade, with a flat side and an angled side. Clean and sharpen both sides. They will need frequent re-sharpening with a whetstone while in use. Take care!

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