

Small Hand Tools

by Rita Pelczar

USING THE RIGHT TOOL for the job helps make the most of your gardening time and effort. Hand tools such as trowels, bulb planters, dibbles, knives, and hand cultivators are by nature environmentally friendly—the only fuel they require is your muscle. And that’s all that’s really needed for the up close and personal chores for which they are intended—planting seeds or bulbs, cultivating and weeding in tight quarters, and transplanting seedlings or bulbs. Some of these tools are great at multi-tasking, others are designed for specific chores.

Because these are some of the most frequently used tools in your green garage, they should be selected with care. It’s a good idea to “test drive” a tool before you purchase it to be sure it suits your grip and strength. Hold the tool in your hand and go through the motions of using it. Does the grip feel comfortable and balanced? Is it too heavy or too light? Ideally, when you use it, it should almost feel like an extension of your hand.

Also take into account how well it will hold up to rigorous use. Stainless steel blades are easy to clean and won’t bend under pressure, but are not as sharp as some other materials. High carbon, forged, or tempered steel tools are durable, resist bending, and will hold a sharp edge. Polished aluminum tools are easy to clean and are very lightweight. Stamped metal tools, though usually cheaper, will bend under stress. The handle of your tool should be fastened securely to the blade and have a comfortable grip.



The narrow blade of a transplanting trowel makes planting seedlings or bulbs a snap.

TIPS FOR HAND TOOL CARE

- Paint your tool handles a bright color to avoid losing them in the garden.
- Clean tools after use and store them in a dry place.
- Sharpen blades periodically with a file or sharpening tool.
- At the end of the season, remove rust with steel wool, remove nicks with a file, and wipe down metal parts with an oiled cloth.

As baby boomers are hitting retirement age, many manufacturers are starting to introduce tools with ergonomically advanced designs. They are strong and light, with padded and supported grips and angled necks or blades.

TROWELS AND OTHER DIGGERS

Selecting a simple tool like a trowel sounds easy, but not all trowels are equal—and neither are the soils they dig in. The size and shape of a trowel varies with its intended use: a standard or nurseryman’s trowel has a broad blade and a sharp point for digging substantial holes. A transplanting trowel has a narrower

blade, ideal for transplanting seedlings; it often is equipped with ruler markings so you can determine the depth of your hole. And a potting trowel has a small blade and typically a slightly rounded tip for use with potting soil and container plants.

Even if you are lucky enough to have light and friable soil, you should own a trowel with a sturdy blade and a securely attached handle. Gardener’s Supply Company offers a rugged forged steel model with a wooden handle. Both blade and handle of the trowels from Johnny’s Selected Seeds are formed from a single piece of stainless steel; the handle is wrapped with a rubber grip. OXO’s

Good Grips Gel-e Trowel and the company's narrower transplanting trowel feature cushioned, non-slip handles and calibrated stainless steel blades so you can monitor the depth of your hole.

If your wrists tire easily, consider a trowel with a blade that is bent at a right angle to the handle, like the Wrist saver from Florian Tools. It is equipped with a comfortable grip and an arm support designed to employ the larger arm and shoulder muscles so that the wrist doesn't do all the work.

Certain gardening chores rate specialized tools: For planting bulbs in an established bed or lawn, nothing beats a bulb planter. Its cylindrical blade cuts out a core of soil so you can drop in your bulb and



The T-shaped handle of this dibble reduces strain on hands when planting holes.

replace the soil without disturbing nearby plants or digging up your lawn.

To make lots of small holes for transplants, a dibble is just the thing. Its handle is usually T-shaped and its sharp business end penetrates soil easily. By rotating the dibble in a circular pattern, you can widen the hole to accommodate the roots of your seedling.

HAND WEEDERS

Unlike long-handled hoes or cultivators that address weeds on a grand scale, hand weeders are meant for fine tuning the weed issues in your flower bed or veg-



A Korean hand plow, or Ho-Mi digger, can be used to plant as well as weed.

etable row. Hand forks or cultivators are great for digging out weeds—roots and all. Deep-rooted weeds may require a dandelion weeder or asparagus knife, which has a long, narrow shaft that is notched at the end. This tool, which looks something like a screwdriver with a fish-tail tip, is very useful for digging up weeds without much soil disturbance. The idea is to insert the weeder alongside the taproot and twist it to loosen the root, allowing you to pull out the entire weed, root and all.

For weeding between pavers, a narrow, sturdy blade is required. Lee Valley Tools offers the crack weeder with its sharp pointed, right-angled, hardened steel blade.

A variety of garden knives—sometimes identified as Dutch, Korean, or Japanese garden knives—make quick work of cutting weeds off at the roots so you can get very close to your plants. Sharpen the blade of these tools regularly for best results.

Also effective for slicing weeds down to the ground are hand hoes that are available with blades in a variety of sizes and



The unique design of the Circlehoe enables you to weed in close proximity to plants.

Sources for Tools

Florian Garden Tools & Accessories,
(800) 275-3618.
www.floriantools.com.

The Garden Hardware Company,
(888) 476-4426.
www.gardenhardware.com.

Index Innovations, Inc., (800) 735-4815. www.circlehoe.com.

Johnny's Selected Seeds, (877) 564-6697. www.johnnyseeds.com.

Lee Valley Tools Ltd., (800) 871-8158.
www.leevalley.com.

OXO. www.oxo.com. Available through many catalogs and major retailers.

shapes—linear, circular, or triangular. The two hand-held sizes of the Circlehoe®, available from Index Innovations, are designed for weeding in tight spaces. The dulled leading edges effectively push a plant's foliage out of harm's way while the lower sharpened edge can cut through weeds very close to the plant's stem.

Unless transplanting is the main task of the day, I have found that I can often do without my trowel; instead I carry a triangular hand hoe for the dual purpose of digging and weeding. Johnny's Selected Seeds offers a model that is lightweight, well balanced, and very sharp. Its blade narrows to a pointed tip so you can work close to plant stems, and its wider end is useful for digging small holes or trenching seed rows.

Similarly, the Korean hand plow—sometimes called a Ho-Mi digger—functions both as a trowel and a cultivating tool, with its curved neck and long, sharply pointed blade. Garden Hardware Company, and Lee Valley offer similar versions.

The selection of gardening tools is highly personal. For the most satisfying results, take into account the specific jobs at hand as well as the size, strength, and mobility of the hands that will perform those jobs. ♻️

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