

## The Scoop on Shovels, Spades, and Forks

by Rita Pelczar

**S**HOVELS, SPADES, and forks are long-handled garden tools designed for digging, lifting, and moving soil and other material. They have been around for centuries, with few changes in design. If your garden is larger than a window box, you will need them for soil preparation, transplanting, bed construction, edging, spreading soil amendments, moving mulch, and lots of other garden maintenance tasks.

The job at hand as well as the material with which you are working—soil, sand, compost, gravel, garden litter, mulch, plants—will determine which tool to use.

### A BLADE OF DIFFERENCE

Shovels and spades are similar in that they both have solid blades attached to a straight handle. The major difference is in the shape of the blade. A shovel's is scooped with a rounded, tapered, or pointed edge. It is thinnest at the tip so it can penetrate the soil more easily. Its scooped surface helps contain loose or granular material so it can be lifted without spilling. The blade of a spade is flat, with a squared edge that makes clean, straight, and if necessary, deep cuts. There is usually a slight angle or bend between the blade and handle of a shovel, while there is typically little or no angle between the handle and blade of a spade.

Shovels and spades often have a rolled step at the shaft end of the blade. This is an important feature to look for if you plan to dig in heavy soil because it allows you to apply pressure with your foot as you dig, which puts considerably less strain on your back and upper body.

### SIZE MATTERS

Obtaining maximum efficiency with these tools requires the right size and shape of the blade for the job and a handle length that is comfortable. Shovels and spades with narrow blades are useful for working in tight spaces or for constructing trenches.



Above left: Rittenhouse's 40-inch-long garden spade features a D-shaped handle; the smaller T-grip spade from Clean Air Gardening is useful for dividing perennials. Above right: The deeply toothed blade of the Super Shovel from Gardener's Supply cuts through clayey and rocky soils.



Broad, scooped shovel blades are great for moving sand, gravel, and soil. Long bladed spades—sometimes called tree spades—are useful for transplanting trees and shrubs and digging deep planting holes.

The Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) suggests that longer handles provide more leverage and ease the strain on back muscles, but shorter lengths result in improved efficiency. And D-shaped handles allow you to apply more force from above. The bottom line: Go with the length that is most comfortable for you and most efficient for the job you are tackling.

Clean Air Gardening has a petite 22-inch-long perennial spade with a sturdy, four-and-a-half-inch blade that I like for digging and dividing closely spaced perennials. Its T-grip handle adds control.

At 40 inches in length, Rittenhouse's stainless steel garden spade with its D-grip handle is suitable for tackling big jobs. Its stainless steel shaft extends 22 inches onto the handle section for added strength—you can lean back without fear of breaking it.

You can put some teeth into your digging—literally—with the Super Shovel from Gardener's Supply. Its high-carbon steel blade is tipped with sharp teeth that

## Sources

**Clean Air Gardening, L.C.,**  
www.cleanairgardening.com.

**Gardener's Supply,**  
www.gardeners.com.

**Gardening with Ease,**  
www.gardeningwithease.com.

**Rittenhouse,** www.rittenhouse.ca.

**Union Jack Stable & Garden,**  
www.unionjackstable.com.

can challenge even hard, packed clay. And its reinforced fiberglass handle is both strong and shock absorbent.

### TINE AFTER TINE

Like shovels and spades, garden forks are used for digging, mixing, lifting, tossing, and working the soil. The business end of a garden fork consists of several sharply pointed tines that are usually slightly curved to create an angle with the handle to facilitate lifting and tossing coarse material such as manure, straw, or compost.

There are several types of forks. The border fork has flat tines, and is primarily used for digging and working the soil. It penetrates soil more easily than a spade and causes less root damage. Its lighter weight accommodates smaller gardeners.

Two forks can be used to divide densely rooted perennials by inserting them back to back into a clump and pulling the forks apart. The digging fork is used for the same purposes, but it has longer tines, so it penetrates deeper. Either can be used for harvesting root vegetables; they are sometimes called potato forks. The handles of both border and digging forks often have a D-shaped or T-shaped grip that can significantly add to their comfortable use and control.



A broadfork is a tool that helps aerate soil or loosen it for planting; it can also be used to loosen soil around root vegetables at harvest time. It consists of two parallel handles attached to either end of a flat crossbar that supports a row of short, straight tines. To use a broadfork, step on the crossbar to sink the tines into the soil, then step off and pull back on the handles to an angle of about 45 degrees before pulling it out and repeating the process about six inches behind the first insertion.

A pitchfork generally has a long, straight handle and long, rounded tines with very sharp points; it is the fork of choice for moving compost, straw, mulch, or weeds.

The Unifork is a hybrid between a pitchfork and a shovel. Made in England and distributed in the United States by Union Jack Stable & Garden, its large, scooped blade is constructed of lightweight, high-grade polypropylene. It is highly effective for shoveling mulch and great for turning the compost pile.

Some forks are designed for specific uses. The Peta Easy Grip Long Reach Fork is made of stainless steel, but weighs only 1.2 pounds. Its ergonomic design makes it a good choice for those with limited strength. It is

Lightweight yet sturdy, the Unifork is a hybrid tool that combines the features of a pitchfork and a shovel.

light enough to be used from a wheelchair. Gardening with Ease, which carries Peta Grip products, also offers an arm grip that can be attached to this or any long-handled tool to provide greater leverage and stability.

So with all of the gardening tasks before you this summer, be sure you have the right digging-mixing-lifting-aerating-edging tools at your disposal. They will help you get your jobs done more efficiently—and with less stress.

Rita Pelczar is contributing editor for The American Gardener.

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