

Which Tool to Buy?

By Susan Camp

A question often asked by novice gardeners is, “How do I know which tools to buy?” The selection of gardening tools, gadgets, and trendy items is endless. A “Whole Gardening Tools Catalog” would require a front end loader to lift it. Every combination of materials exists: plastic, rubber, PVC, copper, brass, aluminum, steel, and every other synthetic material or metal alloy ever discovered or invented.

To while away the rainy days, I decided to look at some of the more popular varieties of gardening tools. I discovered that almost every gardening columnist and blogger has researched the same topic. Maybe we all wonder if we are using the right tools, or if we use the perfect tool, we will grow the perfect garden. I also noticed that some articles actually were advertisements for specific brands of tools.

In their articles, many writers touted the costliest items. There is, after all, a certain degree of snobbery among gardeners. Secretly, we want our gardening tools to carry the best brand with an instantly recognizable name, the most comfortable handles, and the strongest blades, forged by hand by master craftsmen.

Not everyone can afford a solid brass hose nozzle or a pair of pruners that cost \$79.95, nor is it necessary to order the most expensive items in the gardening catalog or on the TV infomercial. You shouldn't buy the \$3.99 model at the discount store, either; it might last a week before disintegrating. Solidly constructed hand tools with steel blades and comfortable, ergonomically correct handles shouldn't cost the amount of your next paycheck.

Several items surfaced on every list contained in articles with titles like “38 Absolutely Necessary Gardening Tools!” and “43 Gardening Tools that Could Put Your House on the Next Garden Tour!” Don't look for these titles. I made them up, but they aren't totally unrealistic. Every article I read mentioned a good set of pruners at the top of the list and several rated a small hand rake for gently removing leaf and other debris from under and between shrubs and perennials.

The tool mentioned most often is the Japanese gardening knife, or hori-hori. The hori-hori is manufactured by several different companies and is a helpful, handy tool. The hori-hori can serve as a trowel, trencher, bulb planter, and weeder. One side of the double blade is saw-toothed for cutting through small roots and dividing perennials like daylilies. It also works well for opening bags of mulch and compost. The price for most models is reasonable.

My personal must-have tool for the past 20 years has been a Korean hand plow, or Ho-Mi. The Ho-Mi consists of a sharp, curved blade, made from a single piece of forged steel, fitted into a hardwood handle. It can be used as a digger, trencher, weeder, and chopper. The traditional Ho-Mi

is right-handed, but left-hand and ambidextrous models are available, as are mini and long-handled models. The traditional Ho-Mi costs less than \$20. I keep several in various locations, so I always have one handy. The point is very sharp when new, and can be sharpened when it dulls, so safety is an issue with this tool. I came close to amputating a toe two summers ago. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication BSE-98P covers basic hand tool safety and maintenance.

Whether your favorite tool is a good pair of pruners, a hand trowel, or something a little more exotic, January is a good time to check the gardening catalogs sales for something new or to perform a little polishing and sharpening of your all-time favorites. And while you are getting your hand tools ready for springtime, spray paint the handles bright red, so you can find them the next time you lose them in the garden.

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