

Tools

*Basic tools for your garden shed
and how to select them*

Functional, pretty, or basic, tool choice can be overwhelming when standing in the aisle of a hardware store, staring at dozens of hooks weighed down with a myriad of shapes, handles, blades, and colors.

On these pages contain descriptions and uses of the basic tools you should have in your shed.

- ✿ Tools for digging or moving material
- ✿ Trimming, cutting, and pruning tools
- ✿ Water tools
- ✿ Tools to protect your body

Text and photos by
Ginger Hudson

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ginger@growingtall.llc



Tools for digging

Hand tools for digging, or moving materials

The basics

Hand spade

Hori knife

Digging fork

Spade shovel

Wheel barrel or large empty plastic pot

Leaf rake and garden rake

The add-ons

Sharp shooter

CobraHead® or small claw

Rock bar



Top: Notice the face and neck of this trowel are one piece, this model is stainless. The specimen is 22 years old.

Above: The hori-hori knife is a perennial favorite among professional horticulturists. Look at the rivets on the handle, they go through the tang, attachment section of the blade, all the way through to the other side. The only way the face would separate from the handle is if it accidentally drops into the weed bin that ends up in the burn barrel. Then you get to make your own handle!

Hand spade or trowel

A hand spade can dig small holes for planting or weeding, and cut small tree roots. Don't skimp on a cheap model or you will be purchasing a new one every month. Look for a hand spade with a solid stainless steel face and neck. The face and neck as one piece is ideal, or the face should be securely attached to the neck. Inexpensive hand spades will bend easily in clay or if a rock is in the way. Low cost models made of composite metals or plastic will break all together. Be sure the neck is secured to the handle by holding the face in one hand the handle in the other and try to wiggle them. If there is any give, put that model down and try the next one. The models with a thin neck inserted into a wood or plastic handle will come apart quickly. The narrow joint where that thin neck joins the face will bend in no time. Hold the spade in your hand and make sure it fits your grip, not too small that you don't have a good grip, or too large to get fingers around. Be wary of ergonomic handles, these are sometimes too far angled which means your wrist and shoulder will have to compensate.

Hori knife

Almost an all-in-one hand tool. It can dig, cut thin roots, measure for bulb planting, and coax weed roots out of the soil. A good hori blade will be made of stainless steel. The tang, or unseen base of the metal blade should be fitted through the

handle and bolts should go all the way through the handle and the tang. This type of construction keeps the blade from coming loose and sliding out of the handle. Faces of hand tools are lost out of handles when they are glued as the glue is worn from water or soil; or the face is lost if it is merely tacked onto a handle.

Digging fork

This implement looks similar to a pitch fork, but it has wider tines-the "teeth", and a shorter handle with a D-shape at the handle end. It's also referred to as a spading fork. This tool is used for digging up plants to transplant. Digging forks

Tools for digging and moving material



damage fewer roots than a shovel slices roots. A digging fork is also used to “turn” soil. Soil is turned when compost is added, or mulch is being mixed into the soil in preparation for layering on new compost. Look for one with a fastener all the way through the plastic or metal handle, through the neck. Where the handle joins the neck is the weakest point and your lever force can break the handle if your yard is rocky. Choose a fork that has the same width neck from the face to handle. Fiberglass necks can be stronger than wood and can last longer if stored properly. This tool is also handy for weeding grasses with runners or for removing entire root systems.

Spade shovel

The spade shovel is the standard shovel everyone thinks of when “shovel” is mentioned. It is great for digging holes in loose soil or when the soil is damp from a recent rain. Spade shovels are also best for shoveling compost into the wheel barrel or into the yard. As with other tools, a fiberglass

handle may last longer than a wooden one when cared for properly. To prevent rust, clean off the face with water, wipe dry and polish with a wax or tool oil. A flat face shovel is used for slicing under turf grass to remove it, and to load gravel.

Wheel Barrel, garden cart, large plastic pot

A large vessel is good for moving compost, mulch, sand, plants and other materials around the yard. Anything too heavy to carry yourself is best moved with a wheel barrel. A wheel barrel, cart or pot is handy for holding the soil you dig out when planting, or holding all the rocks removed from said hole in order to disperse elsewhere. Wheel barrels are usually plastic or metal; obviously the metal barrel will be heavier. Some models feature two wheels in front that remove the challenge of balancing a single front wheel. Both styles require more strength to move than a cart. A cart usually has four wheels with a single handle for pulling (think of the little red wagon). There are even carts with sides that unlatch and fold down if you need to carry long items. A large plastic pot in the landscape trade is a 10 or 20 gallon pot a plant came in. You can use a 10 or 20 gallon empty pot to transport light material.

Garden rake and leaf rake

The garden rake is the stiff hard metal rake that looks like an enlarged comb. All the tines are the same length on a head that’s about 14 to 16 inches wide. Used to spread sand, gravel, compost and mulch, it can also “scratch” the soil when sowing seeds. Select the size that is most comfortable. When the rake is straight up beside you, it should come near your ear.

The leaf rake has a fan head with flexible tines that can be plastic, flat thin metal, or round metal almost like thick wire. They are used for spreading compost in lawns and raking leaves out of plants in garden beds. With either type of rake, look for one with a handle long enough or short enough for your height. Good ergonomics with tools will keep you from having sore shoulders.



Above left: Basic digging fork.

Above: Digging fork being used to harvest leeks. Also used for potatoes in small areas, getting out entire root systems of weeds or perennials without cutting the roots. Notice the rivet at the base of this metal orange handle, it goes all the way through the wood neck to the other side of the metal. The nice long handle connections keeps the lever moment from stressing. I’ve lost track of the age of this fork.

Below: A tarp will keep your work area clean or make it easier to use a bulk load of mulch you had dumped on your lawn. Notice the two wheeled cart, it is easier to move around than a wheel barrel.



Tools for digging



...rakes cont'd

In my experience, the plastic fan rakes are the first to break down. One style of a metal rake with round tines has an adjustable fan head. This is very convenient for adjusting to spread or rake between perennials.

Sharp shooter

A sharp shooter looks like half of a set of post hole diggers but with a longer face. Its use is kind of a cross between a shovel and a pick axe. This is because it is more effective when propelled into the ground rather than stepped on. The benefit of a sharp shooter over a shovel is less resistance when digging a hole. It

slices into the ground better than a spade shovel if you have harder soil, i.e. more clay. It is effective at breaking up a hole in caliche and working around medium sized rocks in rocky soil, more so than a regular shovel. Like the fork, look for one with a fastener all the way through the D- shaped handle, through the neck. Where the handle joins the neck is the weakest point, your lever force could break the handle quick if your yard is rocky. After breaking two plastic handles that were not secured all the way through the neck, I learned to invest in the best designed tool.

CobraHead® or small hand claw

CobraHead is a registered name for a tool shaped like a snake rising up to strike. It has a single tine that curves and flattens at the end. CobraHead has become my favorite tool for

following roots, the end of the tool is not so sharp that it breaks the root before I can unravel it from the soil. It leads out long runners such as bermudagrass rhizomes. It is important not to break the runner because if you leave any of it in the soil it will grow back.

The hand claw looks like the extension of your four fingers, four stiff tines with a 90° bend. These hand tools are great when kneeling to cultivate a small area: adding compost, weeding, or mixing in special fertilizers. These tools use different muscles than a hand spade so you don't wear yourself, or one tool out. It is also handy for weeding seedlings that have soft or shallow roots like bed straw sprouts, annual grass shoots, and young henbit. My hand claw that is all one piece of metal and has been with me for fifteen years.

Rock bar

This long piece of hard iron breaks up rocks or moves heavy rocks by acting as a lever. It has a point tip on one end and a narrow flat wedge on the other. This is a heavy, strong tool that's very handy if you live in a rocky area where explosives are not an option for digging holes. Always be sure to use protective eye and footwear when busting up rocks with this or the pick axe.

A few other tools to consider

Hoe, hula or scuffle hoe, outdoor brooms, and power tools. A hula hoe has a D-shaped slicing blade on on a long handle. This and the standard hoe can be good for fresh weeding in gravelly areas. Power tools generally are used once so renting is an option. However, I am now a big fan of small electric chain saws, they are light-weight, don't require priming or special fuel mixes, and they don't stink! A small chipper-shredder could be a worth-while investments.



Top: Standard single wheel- barrels;
Center: Double wheeled barrels help avoid tipping side to side. Above: a good claw tool, notice the metal is all one piece with rubber wrapped around the handle for comfort.

Tools for cutting



Trimming, cutting and pruning tools

The basics

Hand clippers

Hori knife

Folding saw

Loppers

The add-ons

Hand shears

Bow saw

Biodegradable twine

Ties, wire, plastic, twine

Above: Clippers with a wrapped metal spring. These are fantastic clippers, I have to take the spring off and clean it occasionally.

Below: I've had this pair of clippers for about 25 years. Yes the rubber grips have worn, but the solid metal has been durable. The blade has only been replaced once. The leather sheath has a clip that I can attach to a pocket. The sheath is perfectly fitted to the clippers due to 15 years of working together!



Hand clippers, also called hand pruners

The best style to use is the by-pass clipper. This style of clipper has a curved convex blade that rotates past, or "by-passes" a concave blade. By-pass clippers make cleaner cuts than anvil type clippers. The anvil is a straight sharp blade that cuts against a flat surface. With many plants, this type of blade tends to smush more often than cut. Additionally, the blades can dull quicker. Hand clippers or pruners are a tool that you want to invest money and scrutiny on. Look for a stainless, solid, firm blade. Make sure the blade touches the non-cutting side when it by-passes. Hold all the handles, there are multitudes of handle styles and lengths. Solid metal with rubberized coating will last longest. As common sense would say, plastic handles 1) in hot environments, and 2) with as much as you are going to use it, just will not last. Examine springs as well. Springs that are a flat piece of metal wrapped around itself will harbor dirt between the layers of metal. This will require routine cleaning and oiling. Basic coil springs often come apart from the handles and fatigue quickly. Look at how the spring is attached to the handles and determine if it is durable for your needs.

Folding saw

This is a toothed saw that cuts on push and pull strokes, it cuts very quickly. This saw may also be referred to as straight saw, Grecian saw, or hand saw. A folding straight saw is handy because when not in use, it folds into itself and the blade is protected. The Grecian saw is actually slightly different in that the teeth curve slightly back. Hand saws are good for cutting branches larger in diameter than the clippers or loppers are rated for. Look for hard, heat treated steel teeth.

Loppers

Loppers are used to cut branches with larger diameters than those managed with hand clippers. These may also be referred to as long-handled pruners, or branch clippers. Loppers can be found in by-pass or anvil styles as well. Again, the by-pass is recommended. Loppers with ratcheting joints make using this tool so much easier than a plain joint. The ease reduces the stress on your arms and shoulders. Look for handles in the range of 18" to 20", any longer and it may be hard to generate enough pressure to trim. However, the length does give more leverage. Of course this depends on your length of arms and strength. Since these are used

Tools for cutting



Left: By-pass type cutting tool. Above: Anvil type cutter. Instead of slicing a clean cut through plant parts, it smashes them causing damage. You can see the gap that wears over time making the tool ineffective.



Extension by-pass pruners have a big handle for operation and enable reaching a bit higher without a ladder.

as extensions of clippers in some cases, make your selection based on weight, yet strength of handles. When used for cutting up larger branches already downed from trees, the size will be of less constraint.

Hand Shears

These may also be referred to as hedge shears. Shears have long straight cutting blades, like giant scissors. Look for a pair with straight hard steel, and be sure the cutting edges touch and slide past each other all the way through the cutting stroke. There will be models with varying width of blades. The wider, the sturdier. Wider will be better for thicker, tougher shrubs. Weight will play an important part in selection as using shears can be tiring. Handles can be made of all kinds of materials, take your time feeling the grip and weight before purchasing. Look for shears that have fasteners through the blade tang where it joins the handle. Those styles with the blade neck stuck into wood handles with a collar glued over the end of handle tend to come loose quickly. Shears are not an absolute must, just depends on the aesthetic appearance you are looking for. These will save time when trimming large areas of the same plant like hedges.

Bow saw

This saw is larger than the hand saw and can be used with one hand or two. It looks like a bow (as in bow and arrow) or a D-shape. The toothed blade is fixed at each end, unlike a hand saw which has one free end. The bow saw is used to cut even larger branches or trunks than a hand saw would cut. The blades are replaceable. Look for a bow saw that has a good handle grip at one end.

Biodegradable twine

Twine or string can be cotton, jute, hemp or raffia. It is important for tying up trimmings for curbside brush pick up. This is because the brush is shredded or composted and the twine can degrade along with it. Twine can also be used for tying up plants and vines. In this use, it is handy to use in a location where eventually the plant will hold itself as the twine will disintegrate over time.

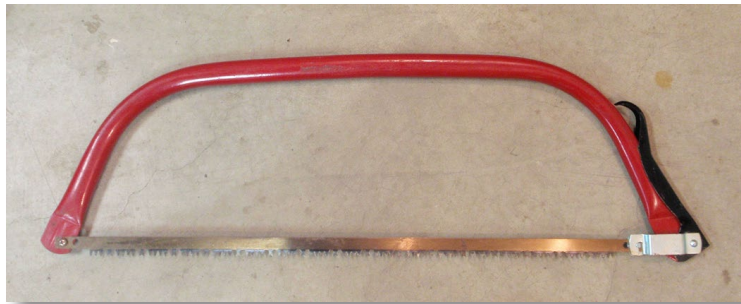
Ties, twine, wire, plastic

Non-biodegradable twine or wire will be used to tie up plants on supports, to tie vines to trellises, or plants to other plants. In these cases, you may be wanting to use the wire repeatedly. Most garden centers carry rolls of the flat, green, plastic ribbon that is easily torn into the sizes you need. It is a soft material and generally does not cut into plants. Wire is stronger and longer lasting and can be used to tie woodier plants up or to make lines for vines to grow on. Be cautious not to use wire for bundling trimming headed to a shredder.

Tools for cutting, pruning, sawing



Left: folding saw.
Below left: bow saw.
Right: hand shears.



Tools for liquids

Tools for water, spraying, and applying liquids

The Basics

Hose-end sprayer
Hose-end valve
Faucet splitter
Sprinklers, soaker hoses

The add-ons

Faucet timers
Hand pump sprayer
Moisture meter
Water collection systems

Hose-end sprayer

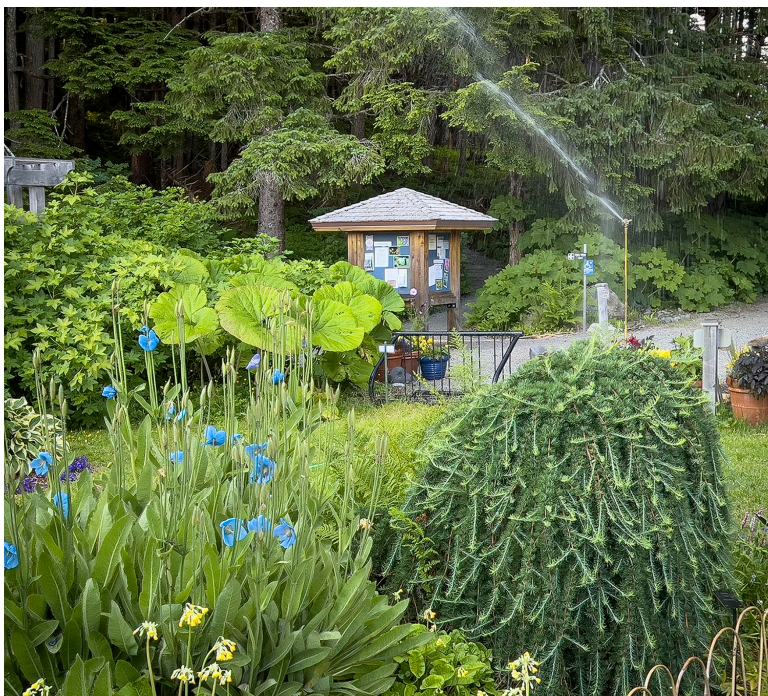
This type of sprayer is going to be your best garden tool in the summer. The handle of the sprayer attaches to the end of a hose and the reservoir holds whatever ingredient you need to spray on your plants—liquid seaweed, garlic solution, baking soda solution, etc. A good hose-end sprayer should have a dial on the top between the hose end and nozzle to adjust the quantity of medium to mix with water. The reservoir will be plastic and should be clearly marked with quantity lines. I highly recommend a metal handled sprayer. The plastic handled hose-end sprayer does not last long—believe me, I've gone through many brands over the years. The plastic handle

A quality hose-end sprayer. In addition to being metal to last longer, the black piece on the spray outflow rotates so plant leaves can be sprayed from underneath.



Tools for liquids

Right: Hose-end valves can increase efficiency in the garden, or around the house.
Below: An over-head water sprayer may cover a broad area, but in dry or sunny environs remember a lot of that broadcast water evaporates before touching the plants.



activator lever breaks generally in one season due to the heat or wear. The cost of the two is not much different—get the metal sprayer! The intake hose in the reservoir will have a filter on the end to keep large particles out of the spray apparatus. This part may need to be rinsed off occasionally to operate properly. Also, over time, the handle may need to be soaked in vinegar to clear out buildup in the dial/sprayer end. Very light maintenance and this tool will last a long time.

Hose-end valve

This valve allows you to leave the water faucet on yet turn the water flow off at the end of the hose so you don't have to walk back and forth to the faucet. Not only handy for gardening, but lots of other outside the house chores. Look for a brass valve, it will last longer than the plastic. Although, if you keep your plastic one out of the sun when not in use, it will last a decent amount of time. For such a small device, the hose-end valve comes in extremely handy.

Faucet splitter

Do you have a hose with a sprinkler attached to your faucet? If so, I hope you have a faucet timer on that hose so you are efficiently using water by timing the sprinkler to run in the morning before 10 am. If this is your situation, have you ever wanted to use the hose for another purpose? To help you get maximum use out of one exterior faucet, install a faucet splitter. This way two or more hoses can run from one faucet exterior faucet. I say one because there are many circumstances where I am maintaining landscapes and the house only has one faucet on opposite ends of the house. Inconvenient. Faucet splitters can be found in this two outlet size as well as 4-outlets and even 6-outlets. I recommend purchasing metal splitters. In my experience, the plastic fails due to extreme sun exposure and by cracking in winter if they freeze.

Sprinklers, soaker hoses

Hoses come in a wide array of styles and every store carries different models. For hose end sprinklers that rotate side to side, look for and spend the money on a metal one. The metal ones will last much lon-

Tools for watering, liquids



Left: Faucet splitters allow more than one hose system. They have separate on-off valves so the main water faucet can be left open.
Right: Hand-pump sprayer, used here to apply a solution of horticultural vinegar on weeds in gravel areas.
Below right: Moisture meter.



ger than plastic models. The plastic becomes brittle and breaks far too quickly under sunlight. For hand held sprinklers, look for a long wand with a shower head. This makes watering much easier on you and the plant. It breaks up the water stream so it is not a harsh jet digging a hole in the soil.

Soaker hoses are very effective at soaking root systems when used properly. Use short hoses and try not to string more than two together. When a long soaker hose is put in use, the water pressure drops off at the end of the hose. If this happens, the plants or roots at the end of the line miss-out on thorough watering. Use the type of soaker hose that has small weep holes all over, these are usually made of black recycled rubber. These hoses can be very unwieldy when new. In order to help hold them down, U-shaped wire stakes can be purchased or made from old coat hangers. Remove and store soaker hoses in the winter to extend their life. By repositioning them every year, you know where they are. If the soaker hose is left in the garden all year, it gets covered by compost, or leaves, or weeds and the location of the hose is forgotten. Many a soaker hose has been destroyed when I have attempted to dig new holes in the winter or spring! Avoid the hoses that have all the holes along one side, these shoot water into the air where it can evaporate before being used.

Hand pump sprayer

This is usually a gallon bottle with a hand pump used to create pressure to spray out of a hand-held spray wand. A hand sprayer is useful for covering more area than a hand-held bottle and less area than a hose-end sprayer. Hand squeezing a bottle will get tiring quick if you have to treat multiple plants. The hand sprayer is also useful for weed control when applying horticultural vinegar. There is no hand sprayer that lasts forever. Many of the products used, even natural ones, wear out the rubber gas-kets and springs in the handle grip of the sprayer. Look for a brand that is always in stock and be sure the retailer carries the replacement parts.

Moisture meter

Not sure if the plants need water? Experienced gardeners know the signs and symptoms of plants drying out. An easy test for garden or potted plants is to stick your fingers in the soil, if it is dry and inch down in pots, 4 - 6 inches or deeper in gardens depending on the plantings, it's probably time to water.



Tools for the body

Tools to protect your body

This category of tools will be subjective to each individual. However, if you are new to gardening, depending on your climate, the following suggestions will make the task of maintenance a bearable experience.

Gloves: rubber dipped, leather

Hat, sunglasses, safety glasses

Shoes, boots

Knee pads

Clothing

Cotton handkerchief
or bandana

Water, electrolytes



Latex dipped breathable gloves. This example has thin dipping which offers good dexterity for weeding and basic protection.

Gloves

There are jillions of gloves in the gardening and home-improvement market. Don't be shy about trying them all on before you make a purchase. Nothing will be more annoying than uncomfortable gloves while working in the garden. In the warm season, the latex fingered knitted gloves are extremely flexible without being too hot. The latex gloves are beneficial when conditions are damp or wet. Latex gloves do not have seams and are much more flexible. Thin dipped gloves are superb at weeding. The best are made of breathable material with rubberized fingers. Sometimes they are even called "weeders".

All cotton or canvas gloves defeat the purpose when your fingers will be getting wet. Cotton gloves tend to wear out quicker because the seams get stressed. When handling rough material like bricks or concrete pavers, the finger pads of the cotton gloves wear out fast.

Leather or mechanics gloves are best to use when handling stone, rough wood, roses or other rough material. The rough stuff can wear down and cause holes in the latex gloves. I have found leather gloves with gauntlets to be especially protective. Not only from thorns, but a longer glove blocks mosquitos and no-see-ums that target my wrists between a long sleeve and a standard glove.

Hat, sunglasses

Sun can be a challenge to work under for your vision. Extreme bright light sometimes makes it hard to see details when trimming. Light reflected from other surfaces can affect your eyes and skin and cause health problems in the future. I need not lecture everyone on personal health, but, I will say don't underestimate the power of the sun—for good and bad. For those fair of skin, burning of that skin will happen in as little as 20 minutes on a cloudless day. At lower latitudes, cooking your head while also perspiring will cause a heat stroke quicker than the same time spent outside higher latitudes. Scientifically, the deserts are worse, but it can be dangerous anywhere for those new to spending a great deal of time outside, having fun, and losing track of time.

Tools to protect the body

Shoes/boots

There are those that like to garden barefoot, there are those that don't like ant bites. For the latter, I recommend boots. Hopefully you will realize you are standing in an ant bed before the critters reach the top of the boot. Speaking from experience, ants are very quiet and fire ants are very fast. If you think you are in ant territory, this is one location where you want your pants tucked into socks! If you live in the western area you may encounter scorpions, ants, and rattle snakes, not to mention all the thorny plants. In most cases, these critters will be just as wary of you as you are of them. But there is always the surprise encounter. At the least, some kind of shoe is recommended due to things like thorns and sticker burs. I have seen mesquite thorns penetrate flip flops and tennis shoes. Boots can provide ankle support in rocky and uneven environs.

There is a plethora of rubber boots in the market place. Be warned that thin, inexpensive models will crack where the ball of the foot bends.

Knee pads

There are gardener's knee pads that strap around your knees—I have yet to find a style that stays in place and does not slide down. A rectangular pad is the standard. There are firm cell foam styles and soft-cell coated in vinyl. I've recently discovered heavy-duty mechanic's pads and they come in a variety of sizes. Absent a pad, I've even folded up gloves and sweatshirts, knees are pretty important! Everyone's sensitivity will be different.

Clothing

Clothing, like shoes may also be optional, in the privacy of your garden. However, if you are not looking for mosquito bites, sunburns, teddy bear cholla in your bear bum, or rashes, then long sleeves and pants may be in order. Cactus spines can be very unpleasant to remove because sometimes you cannot see them. The smaller spines can irritate your skin due to other clothing rubbing and moving the spines around. Not to scare anyone out of gardening, but we also want to be protected against poison ivy and oak, latex irritant plants like thistles, or any other allergy inducing species. Mosquitos are ever present—it takes them only three days to mature after a rain event. Chiggers could be in your area if there are wild areas with wildlife near, and don't forget ticks. Chiggers and ticks like to nestle into your skin in tight places like sock tops, waist lines and other places where the sun doesn't shine. Look into insect repellants to help avert chiggers.



Thicker and textured rubber dipped gloves. They are good for handling rough material, like piles of trimmings, gravel, rocks, pavers, etc.

Water and sports drinks

You, like your plants, lose water through your protective skin all day. Even on a low humidity day when you think you are not sweating, you are. So be sure to keep a water bottle in the garden with you when you are working. Drinking out of the hose is not advised, who knows what lives in that hose or what it is made of. If you spend extended hours outside, consider drinks that provide electrolytes. Although you may not think it is "active", gardening can deplete you of necessary elements just as sports do. Listen to me now and believe me later, I've been to the emergency room twice for dehydration, it sneaks up on you. In the summer or on hot days, consider working only in the mornings from sunup to noon. The hottest time of the day is between generally noon to 5pm.

Cotton bandana or handkerchief

A bandana will come in extremely handy on hot humid days. Even if you are wearing a hat, the sweat will be dripping into your eyes. If you find yourself outside a little longer than you expected, a wet bandana around the neck can help keep your core temperature down. Remember to rinse and re-wet every so often, that fresh cool water will keep your spirits up.

Tools

*Basic tools for your garden shed and how to select them.
From a gardener and landscape designer with over 23 years
of experience (+ as a child with my mom in the cactus club!)*



For more tools, guidance on usage, and general maintenance techniques,
please see my ebook at Apple Books:

[A Guide to Landscape Maintenance](#) by Virginia Hudson

My guide contains photos, interactive slide shows of basic garden challenges,
and interactive images of some techniques. For Mac and iOS devices.

I am the current Manager and Horticulturist at the Jensen-Olson Arboretum in Juneau, AK. My garden experience includes acting as Special Horticulture Project Manager at the Alaska Botanical Garden in Anchorage, AK; teaching landscape design and maintenance courses in Texas and Alaska; I've designed gardens in Texas and Alaska, and maintained landscapes in Texas, California, and Alaska. I've been a featured guest numerous times on KLRU's Central Texas Gardener, and for many garden groups; and a proud presenter at the Northwest Flower and Garden Festival in Seattle, WA. I've tested tools from zone 9 to zone 3!

Text and photos by Ginger Hudson

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