

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

	University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment <i>Cooperative Extension Service</i>
	extension.ca.uky.edu HORTICULTURE EDUCATION Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, PhD Daviness County Extension Office

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Preparing Tools for Next Gardening Season
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Nothing is more frustrating than reaching for a garden tool next growing season and finding it dirty or broken. At the end of the season, take the time to clean, disinfect, and repair tools to protect them and prevent the spread of diseases to other plants. Also, remember to maintain the lawn mower.

Begin with washing soil off shovels, hand trowels, hoes, and rakes with strong streams of water. Cleaning products such as dish detergent or liquid hand soap can be used with a brush or broom on the tool. A stick, block of wood, or wire brush scrapes off stuck soil. Avoid soaking a tool in water for a long period of time because metal parts develop rust.

Small spots of hard-to-remove soil and rust can be eliminated with steel wool or sandpaper. Rinse after using a cleaner and dry the tools again to avoid the formation of rust.

Even though soil is removed from the tool and looks clean, it may carry fungal, bacterial, and viral plant pathogens ready to spread to healthy plants. They need to be clean because organic matter inhibits the disinfection process. Disinfecting the tool may include a soak, dip, or

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spray. Examples of common household products to disinfect tools include 70% rubbing alcohol, hand sanitizer, antimicrobial bath cleaner, or 10% bleach solution (mix 9 parts water with 1 part bleach). Never mix bleach with other cleaning products because a toxic gas may be produced. The length of time the product needs to stay in contact with the surface to kill or inactivate pathogens depends on the product. Products such as household cleaners like Lysol™ and 70% rubbing alcohol require contact for 3 to 5 minutes to effectively sanitize.

After the product is sanitized, rinse thoroughly because some products such as bleach may corrode tools and metal surfaces. Dry the tools to keep rust from forming.

To prevent rust formation on metal parts of the tools during storage, rub the metal with an oil-soaked rag or spray the parts with oil. Sewing machine oil may be used. Do not use vegetable oil.

Winterize pruning tools such as hand pruners, loppers, and pruning saws by cleaning debris and sticky sap off the metal blades. Disinfect the blades and sharpen them. Replace deeply grooved and notched ones. A sharp blade makes the pruning job faster and results in an even, smooth cut which is better for the plant. Lightly oil the metal blades to keep them from rusting.

The metal blades of hoes, shovels, and tiller tines should be cleaned and sharpened. A sharp edge makes the job easier and faster.

Next, check the handles of the tools. Tighten loose screws and nuts and replace missing ones. Replace broken and cracked handles. Sand rough areas on wooden handles until smooth. The handles may need painting, varnishing, or rubbing with linseed oil to protect the wood.

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Painting the handles with a bright color, such as orange or red, makes the tool easier to find in the garden or lawn.

Fiberglass handles should be inspected for splintering. If necessary, wrap the handles with electrician's tape.

One way to store hand tools is to hang them on a wall or pegboard to protect the blades to keep them sharp and make them easier to find. Tracing an outline of the tool on the pegboard lets everyone know where it is stored. This also helps to keep an inventory of the tools.

Lawn mowers, tillers, and other power equipment should be cleaned as well. The underside of the lawn mower deck is easy to forget. Check underneath the deck where layers of grass clippings develop. After cleaning, repaint the deck with metal paint if needed or use oil to condition it.

Change the oil in power equipment to prevent engine sludge that can cause the internal engine parts and seals to deteriorate. Add fresh oil of the proper viscosity according to the owner's manual.

Clean or change the air filter if it wasn't done during the mowing season. A dirty air filter can restrict airflow into the engine and cause the engine to run inefficiently.

Check the spark plug to be sure it's not fouled and is properly gapped. Disconnecting the spark plug for the winter is also suggested.

Gasoline should not be left in the fuel tank. Water can condense in the fuel tank and cause problems with starting the mower or it can run poorly in the spring. Run the mower out of gas after the last mowing or drain it. You can do this yourself or have a professional do it as part of an annual service. Consult the owner's manual for more winterizing details.

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Sharpen the blades of mowers. Replace blades with deep nicks. A dull lawn mower blade increases fuel consumption and wear on the engine, belts, and bearings. Also, a dull mower blade tears off the grass leaf, which increases the susceptibility of the grass blades to diseases.

For more information, about winterizing tools contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu. “Cleaning & Disinfecting Hand Tools & Planting Supplies” publication is available at

<https://plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/sites/plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/files/PPFS-GEN-17.pdf>

Annette’s tip:

To locate a site to cut your own Christmas tree, visit the Kentucky Christmas Tree Association’s website at <http://www.kychristmastreefarms.com>. Go to Member Farms and then Find-A-Farm. Information on caring for the fresh-cut tree is also available there.

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