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Ergonomic Tools That Prune Away Gardening Pains

By **BOB TEDESCHI**

A decade ago, my wife and I built an absurdly ambitious garden that involved homemade fencing, a bamboo-and-string trellis for the beans and, for me, about 10 backbreaking hours behind a tiller.

As we planted, a neighbor strolled by, grinning. “Growing some deer food?”

Hilarious!

Weeks later, our little farm verging on a big harvest, we awoke to find the fence trampled, the trellises flattened and the vegetables gone.

It was farmageddon. Or armagarden. Or hell.

I have since avoided gardening, and not just because of the deer. Knee and elbow surgeries killed what little enthusiasm I had for digging and kneeling, so I limit my harvesting activities to the produce aisle.

In recent years, though, I heard enough about the virtues of ergonomic gardening tools that I thought it might be worth another shot. But first, I queried a trio of gardening specialists: Barbara Pleasant, a gardening author and contributing editor to *Mother Earth News*; Pam Ruch, who managed the test gardens for *Organic Gardening* magazine; and Bruce Butterfield, the research director for the National Gardening Association.

My question: Is the buzz surrounding ergonomic gardening tools just noise, or have there been legitimate innovations lately? Their answers could put some fresh veggies on my family’s table this summer (if the deer don’t get to my new garden first).

“When I started gardening 30 years ago,” Ms. Pleasant said, “hand tools had wooden handles that rotted and splintered, and the only hoes we had were designed to chop cotton. Are today’s lightweight tools with easy-to-grip handles better? Yes, they are.”

And much of that improvement, my panelists and others said, has come in recent years, as manufacturers and retailers moved away from the one-size-strains-all approach.

The first such tool that bears mentioning is the only one that all three panelists went out of their way to rave about: the Cobrahead weeder and cultivator, manufactured in Cambridge, Wis. The business end of the tool looks like a longshoreman's hook, but with a flare resembling a cobra's hood. It comes in two versions, for close work and for standing work.

Ms. Pleasant said she's "gotten kind of dependent on it."

Mr. Butterfield said it's the most efficient tool for taking out weeds, "and it's built like a Russian dump truck so it won't break."

Ms. Ruch acknowledged that the conventional handle doesn't exactly scream "ergonomic" in the era of molded, rubber-coated instruments. "But it's the best all-around tool for the garden, because you don't use a twisting motion," she said. "You're kind of punching it into the soil, so you're using your arm muscles rather than your wrist, which is a real area of vulnerability."

Flower gardeners and landscapers know this all too well, especially those who have spent a day with a bad set of pruners.

Ms. Ruch favors bypass pruners, as opposed to anvil pruners, for their ease of use. "And everybody loves Felco pruners," she said. "You can buy spare parts for them, which is great. But Bahco pruners seem to stay sharper longer, and I've never lost a part on them. I may be switching my allegiance."

Bahco and Fiskars sell pruners with front handles that rotate toward you when you squeeze them, further reducing hand and wrist strain. (I tried Bahco's Professional PXR-M2 and the Fiskars PowerGear pruner.) Fiskars last year added a gel pad to the PowerGear pruner for further comfort, and it still weighs less than the Bahco PXR-M2.

I put the Fiskars PowerGear in the hands of my wife, who does the pruning in our household, and her eyes lighted up.

The Corona ComfortGel 3/4-inch bypass pruner, meant for smaller jobs than the Fiskars and Bahco models I tested, felt lighter than both, and although its ComfortGel handle didn't rotate, it was quite nice to hold.

For planting and digging jobs that are easy on the joints, curved tools are becoming more common. They allow users to align their wrists to suit their preferences.

Ms. Pleasant and Ms. Ruch recommended the Transplanter Pro, by Radius, which is akin to a shovel and features a circular handle and a narrower blade. Radius also builds a line of

hand tools for the garden, including a scooper, weeder, transplanter, cultivator and trowel, each with a curved handle.

Until this year, Radius sold its tools exclusively through specialty garden retailers, but this spring the hand tools began appearing in mainstream hardware stores under the Miracle-Gro brand.

Perhaps no tool epitomizes the old one-size-fits-all approach to gardening tools as much as the shovel. Ms. Ruch said she had heard good things about, but had not yet tested, the HERShovel designed for women.

HERShovel was developed by Green Heron Tools, a Pennsylvania-based start-up led by two women who enlisted the help of ergonomic researchers and female farmers. The result is a shovel with a D-shape handle, a shorter shaft and an angled blade that features oversize areas for foot placement. The makers say the design accounts for the fact that women rely more on lower body strength when shoveling.

The shovel weighs about four pounds, and comes in three sizes. I'm 6-foot-2, and the large version worked fine for me; I liked the handle as much as the one on the Transplanter Pro, and both were considerably better than my old dinosaur shovel.

I used them while trying a new method of ergonomic gardening, the so-called stand-up garden. The idea is simple enough: when your garden sits on a platform, you needn't bend over.

Of course, you don't need a shovel to get started, unless, like me, you must first clear a 10-foot section of forsythias to make room. The Bahco 396 JT pullsaw and, especially, the Fiskars PowerGear lopper (which Ms. Ruch recommended) worked well on the thickest forsythia branches. I tried a new pair of competing loppers marketed to professional landscapers, and I needed considerably less strain to cut through thick branches.

After hauling two huge tarps filled with forsythia branches and a wheelbarrow filled with around 75 pounds of roots, I assembled the stand-up garden (from Gardener's Supply) in about 30 minutes.

A Gardener's Supply representative said to avoid using soil in the stand-up garden, because it tended to compress too much. The company instead recommends coir, which is made from the discarded husks of coconuts and lasts three or four harvests.

If you choose a stand-up garden for ergonomic reasons, bear in mind that coir comes in bricks that must be soaked and broken up before using. In my case, that meant soaking roughly 35 bricks, weighing 1.4 pounds each. That's before you add the weight of the water

(around seven pounds a brick). So for my stand-up garden, I moved around 280 pounds of material, in multiple batches, over a two-hour span.

Unless you have a giant utility sink somewhere at hip level, or teenage children who can be enlisted for the job, consider subcontracting this element of the project.

For hauling, Mr. Butterfield suggested the Ames True Temper Total Control wheelbarrow, which was introduced in 2010 and also features round handles. I was doubtful until I noticed my hands using most of the handle surface while carting and dumping. Then I was sold.

I planted tomatoes, peppers, beets, carrots and lettuce (yes, I know it's late for that) and loved the fact that I barely had to bend to plant, and I'll barely have to bend to harvest.

Come to think of it, neither will the deer.