

Tools and Tips for Smart, Safe, and Healthy Gardening

by Rita Pelczar

THE GOOD NEWS is that the longer we garden, the smarter we become about growing plants well. The *bad* news is that the longer we garden, the more our bodies object to the hard labor that's required. Lifting pots, spreading mulch, turning compost, and digging planting holes are not activities for weaklings. My gardening ambitions often exceed my physical stamina, so I welcome tools that help me work more efficiently and comfortably.

Ergonomically designed tools aim to reduce muscle and joint stress by keeping the body in a neutral position. Many are lightweight and include features that maximize power by using the large arm and leg muscles so as to reduce strain on the smaller muscles in your wrists, shoulders, and hands. Using tools that suit your body size is important for maintaining proper posture and protecting your back from injury. And properly sized, padded grips increase both stability and comfort.

READY, SET, GO!

As with any type of exercise, stretching for five to 10 minutes before you begin gardening helps prepare your muscles for the workout to come. Dressing appropriately helps you avoid minor injuries in the garden. For outdoor activities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends wearing sturdy shoes, gloves, long sleeves, wide-brimmed hats, and sunglasses, and using sunscreen with a sun protective factor (SPF) of at least 15 as protection from damaging sun exposure.

For SPF 30 sun protection plus a safeguard against biting insects and pests, try **Bug Me Not Shirt and Pants**, available from Gardener's Supply Company. Both boast "Insect Shield Technology®," which imbeds the repellent permethrin into the garment's fabric to guard you from ticks, mosquitoes, chiggers, flies, and no-see-ums, and it lasts for up to 70



The Bug Me Not Shirt and Pants provide protection from insects while the Hergonomic® Shovel, designed especially for women, makes planting shrubs more efficient for the author.

washings. I like the option of wearing the insect-repelling clothes rather than spraying a repellent directly on my skin. The fabric is lightweight and very comfortable. (For more tips on garden safety, see the sidebar on the opposite page.)

BALANCE AND SIZE

Lightweight, well-balanced tools can make many chores easier. It's a good idea to try out tools before you purchase them, because when it comes to balance and weight, one size does *not* fit all. I like the gently curved



Ergonomic Trowel from Plow and Hearth

handles of the **Ergonomic Rake** and **Draw Hoe** from Plow and Hearth, which seem to provide just a little extra leverage for me. Each has polypropylene hand grips at both the end and middle, so your hands don't slip. Plow and Hearth also offers a line of short-handled tools: the **Ergonomic Trowel**, **Transplanter**, and **Weeder** have lightweight but durable aluminum blades and slightly curved handles with finger grips and a thumb rest.

The **Hergonomic® Shovel** from Green Heron Tools is my go-to tool when planting trees and shrubs. Designed specifically for women, it is lightweight—about four-and-a-half pounds—and has a padded D-grip handle that is wide enough for both hands. The tempered steel blade has a large step with raised treads and its slight tilt provides optimum leverage. The ash shaft is available in three lengths to accommodate different heights.

COMFORTABLE AND SECURE GRIP

A comfortable grip is essential if you're working for an extended time at any gardening chore. The **Good Grips Garden Scissors**, built for light pruning jobs as well as cutting twine or opening bags, have a loop handle that allows you to use your entire hand to make cuts, rather than just your fingers. The **Good Grips Bypass Pruner** is designed for cutting stems and branches up to three-quarters of an inch in diameter. Both have soft, non-slip handles that help reduce discomfort of repetitive squeezing motions. In addition to its non-slip handle, the **Good Grips Weeder** is equipped with a

GARDENING SAFETY TIPS

You are probably familiar with the following safe gardening tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), but they are worth repeating as we move into the warmest period of the year:

- Use sunscreen on any exposed skin and wear clothing that protects from sun and insects. If deer visit your garden, apply tick-repellents to your skin to reduce the risk of exposure to Lyme disease or other tick-borne illnesses.
- Wear appropriate safety gear—including gloves, goggles, ear protection, etc.—for whatever activities you are doing.
- Read and follow instructions for tools and chemicals; keep tools and equipment in good working order and well sharpened; keep all tools and chemicals out of the reach of children.
- Don't get overheated: Drink plenty of water, take breaks, pay attention to signs of heat-related illness such as headache, rapid pulse, dizziness, nausea, etc.
- If you've been relatively inactive, work for short spells at first, then gradually increase both the time and intensity of your tasks. Vary your gardening activities to avoid overusing the same muscles.
- Last but definitely not least, check with your primary care physician to make sure your tetanus and diphtheria vaccinations are up to date. —R.P.



Good Grips weeder features a fulcrum.

triangular fulcrum for extra leverage for pulling weeds. All Good Grips tools are available from OXO.

Corona's **Comfort Gel Transplanter** and **Weeder** have cushioned, non-slip handles with a thumb rest for leverage and control. I like the serrated edge, which comes in handy for cutting roots or opening bags of fertilizer or mulch. The stainless steel blade of the transplanter is equipped with depth markings, and the forked, angled blade of the weeder provides excellent leverage for removing tap-rooted weeds such as dandelions.



Corona Comfort Gel Weeder

There's nothing like a sharp blade when you are making a lot of pruning cuts. Fiskar's **Loop-handle Carabiner Pruner**, **Shear Ease™ Grass Shears**, and **PowerGear® Softgrip Pruner** fit the bill. Their precision-ground steel blades have a low-friction coating that keeps them sharp and reduces sap build-up, which can gum up blades. The Car-



Fiskar's Shear Ease™ Grass Shears

abiner Pruner's built-in clip attaches to your belt loop so it's handy when you need it. The Grass Shears rotate 360 degrees so you can approach plants without twisting your hand at an awkward angle. Both the Carabiner Pruner and the Grass Shears have comfortable loop handles that are lightweight and afford good control. The PowerGear® Pruner's gears add significant leverage so less strength is required to make your cuts.

For removing larger branches, the **Safe-Grip Pruning Saw** from Gardener's Supply has an ergonomically designed, ribbed handle that ensures a secure grip

Sources

Clean Air Gardening,
www.cleanairgardening.com.
Corona Tools, coronatoolsusa.com.
Fiskars, www2.fiskars.com.
Gardener's Supply Company,
www.gardeners.com.
Green Heron Tools,
www.greenherontools.com.
OXO Good Grips, www.oxo.com.
Plow and Hearth,
www.plowhearth.com.

and a blade sheath protects your hand. The sharp-toothed, curved blade is just under 10 inches long and folds for safe storage.

Stout's **Back Saver Grip**, available from Clean Air Gardening, can be attached to any long-handled tool to increase leverage and reduce back strain. It's a sturdy plastic D-handle that is secured with four screws around the shaft of a shovel, rake, hoe, pitchfork, or pole pruner and can be moved from one tool to another. Attached to a rake, the additional grip reduces the need for bending; used on a pole pruner, it provides stability.

RAISED PLANTERS

For some people, bending over to tend a garden can be uncomfortable or even



Attached to the handle of a hoe, Stout's Back Saver Grip reduces strain by increasing leverage.

dangerous. But don't despair: Raised planters can bring your garden to a comfortable working height. There are many designs and kits for such planters that vary in size and material.

A good example is the **Vegtrug™ Patio Garden**, which won the Direct Gardening Association's 2012 Green Thumb Award for Outstanding New Product. Constructed of wood, it is attractive as well as functional. It is 30 inches wide

and is available in two lengths—39¼ and 70 inches. Its 31½-inch height is comfortable for working without bending. A fabric liner helps retain the soil mix but allows excess water to drain; like most raised gardens, frequent watering is necessary during warm, dry weather. The center of the V-shaped trough accommodates tomatoes, peppers, or other deep-rooted plants, while shallow-rooted plants such as salad greens can be grown toward the edges.

For working in raised beds, it can be helpful to have tools that extend your reach a bit. The **Gardener's Lifetime Long-Handled Raised Bed Cultivator** and **Trowel** do just that. With their 18-inch wooden handles and high-carbon steel blades, they reach to the back of your elevated planter from the front, even if one side is against a wall. Both these tools and the Vegtrug™ are available from Gardener's Supply Company.

COOL DOWN

When you finish working in the garden, it's a good idea to stretch your muscles again before heading for the shower or the porch swing. I like to cool down by taking a walk around my gardens, examining the results of my day's efforts and making plans for what I'll tackle next. 🌿

Rita Pelczar is a contributing editor for The American Gardener.



The elevated Vegtrug™ Patio Garden is a boon for gardeners with back problems.