

Winterizing Garden Tools

By Sandra Mason, University of Illinois Extension educator

While the growing season ends and gardeners mow, snip, and spade for the final time this fall, it's time to think of proper cleaning and storage of all that garden equipment.

A little preventive maintenance now can prevent frustration and expensive repair in the future. Proper maintenance also extends the life of tools and equipment and makes working with them easier and more efficient.

While hoses don't need a great deal of care, the care that we provide is important if we want them to last. Store hoses on hose supports or reels or coil loosely rather than hanging them on nails. Hose supports or reels prevent sagging and kinking. Before storing hoses away for the winter, drain all the water from them and store in a dry location.

Remove caked-on soil or vegetation from all tools using a wire brush, scraper, or a strong stream of water. Wire brushes marketed to clean grills are a good option, because they usually include a scraper.

Lubricate all tool pivot points and springs. Sharpen hoes, spades, pruners, loppers, and saws.

Check all tools thoroughly for loose screws or nuts and tighten them accordingly. Replace or repair broken handles and other bent or broken parts.

Finally, spray all bare metal parts and cutting edges with penetrating oil such as WD-40 to prevent rust. Wipe wooden handles with boiled linseed oil to help prevent wood from cracking and drying.

Consider painting the handles red or orange, or applying a bright-colored tape for quick location in the garden. Hang tools in their proper storage spot.

All sprayer parts should be thoroughly washed and rinsed. Most pesticides recommend triple rinsing of sprayers. Apply oil to moving parts as listed in owner's manual. Tip or hang the sprayer upside down when not in use so that it can drain and dry thoroughly.

Wheelbarrows, carts, and wagons may also need some attention before winter. Clean them thoroughly and touch up paint chips with spray paint to prevent exposed steel from rusting. Grease wheels to prevent squeaking.

Power equipment, such as lawn mowers, tillers, and chippers, require additional winter preparations. Always refer to the owner's manual for specific information. However, in general, wipe the equipment to remove collected grease, dirt, and plant material. Theoretically, this should be done after each use. Tighten loose screws and nuts.

Sharpen cutting edges and wipe with an oily rag if this wasn't done earlier. If your equipment has a four-cycle engine, change the oil by following instructions listed in your owner's manual. Remove all gasoline from tank by running engine until it stops.

Remove the spark plug and squirt a little oil into the cylinder head. Give the engine a turn or two to coat the cylinder walls with oil, and then replace the plug.

Two-cycle engines, or engines that run with a gas and oil mixture, also should have the oil-gas mixture removed for the winter. Run the engine with the choke open to remove fuel from the lines. Check the spark plug and replace if it is worn. Replace other worn or damaged parts as well.

This is the time of the year when many gardeners feel they've finally caught up with all their activities. However, don't put your feet up until after the maintenance projects have been completed.