

A Greener View: Preparation and gift guide for spring gardeners

by Jeff_Rugg

As 2008 near its end, it is time put away your garden tools and start planning how to make it easier to work in next spring's garden and landscape. It also time to find the right gift for the gardener on your list.

Perhaps you are the gardener. If so, you might wish to leave this article in a place where someone will see it and get the hint.

One of my favorite pruning tools is the Extended Reach Power-Lever Shears from Fiskars. It is a long name for a long tool. I used it yesterday to cut down a weedy-looking perennial bed next to my driveway. The 8-inch cutting edge on the scissorslike blades is on the end of 3-foot-long handles.

The blades can be kept straight like a huge pair of scissors or they can be turned at right angles to the handle. The handle ends also have a right-angle extension to make pruning easy at any angle.

With them, I was able to cut the old perennial stalks near the ground without bending over. I use the same tool on a wide yew hedge to keep the top flat and the sides smooth. Your local Fiskars dealer should have them for under \$100.

If your hands and arms get sore when you prune, you might consider Fiskars PowerGear tools. They have a patented gear design that provides maximum leverage near the middle of the cut, where resistance is greatest.

They feature handles that roll to follow your hand's natural clenching motion as you make cuts, reducing stress and fatigue. While it takes getting used to at first, it soon becomes second nature. These pruners are winners of the Arthritis Foundation's Ease-of-Use Commendation and are ideal for people with arthritis, rheumatism, or carpal tunnel syndrome.

When I dig small holes for annuals and bulbs, or dig up weeds growing in tight spots, I use a couple of small trowels from Radius Garden. Their handles are semicircular, which allows my hands and wrists to be in a comfortable straight line with the hole, rather than at an awkward right angle as with a other trowels.

The trowel blades are made from a lightweight blend of magnesium and aluminum that has a finish to keep dirt from sticking to them. The handles are made from a bright, green thermoplastic, which helps me locate them. Radius Green trowels remains warm in cool weather and cool in hot weather, and their handles are easy to grip even when wet.

I use the narrow-bladed Weeder tool to dig many of my holes because it cuts through soil more easily than a wide-bladed tool. Radius Garden also offers a line of garden shovels with a circle at the top of their handles to give gardeners a better grip from any angle.

Instead of hand digging to turn over a vegetable garden, it might be time to buy a rototiller. You could rent a heavy monstrosity, but here is an easier way. The Mantis gas-powered tiller has been around for years, but now they have a 21-pound electric model. It comes with a risk-free, one-year home trial; how can you pass that up? The Mantis is light enough to be carried and to till small areas between established perennials. It also has an attachment that replaces the blades in order to edge flower beds.

Because tools won't be used for several months, it is important to store them properly. This means taking the time to clean them, repair them, protect them and prepare them for future use. If the tool has metal surfaces, clean it with a kitchen pot-and-pan scrub pad, and replace the kitchen one. If you can't sneak the pad out of the house, a barbecue-grill scrubber will also work. Remove all the dirt and scrub off as much rust as possible.

Sharpen all blades on shovels, hoes, hand pruners, loppers and power tools. Use a file or grinder - with safety glasses, of course - to remove nicks. Try to keep the edge sharpened at the original angle. Two-sided blades, like those on lawn mowers, should have the same amount of metal on each side. Check the balance by hanging it on a nail to see if it hangs evenly.

Re-paint or lightly coat the metal with oil or WD-40. The WD stands for water displacement and the 40 is for the 40th attempted formula. This will prevent metal from rusting.

Don't forget wooden handles. Check for splinters and cracks. Wash and sand them with fine sandpaper, if necessary. Coat with paint, linseed oil or varnish.

Before storing gas-powered motors you can run the engine until the gas runs out or you can add a fuel stabilizer. If the motor has a separate oil tank, you should replace the oil. Another way to handle this chore is to have it serviced at a repair shop, especially if it takes more than one or two pulls to start the motor. In fact, you might get an early bird special.

Clean or replace spark plugs and filters. Oil all moving parts and check all rubber gaskets. Check pull cords on power tools for wear and tear.

While you are at it, inspect electrical extension cords for nicks. Look at plugs for frayed insulation and loose wires. If a cord has a big nick in it, you can cut the cord in two and replace the ends with new plugs. This will replace the damaged cord with two safer cords, which together will be nearly as long as the old original.

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