



Can You Dig It? Save Your Back by Using Your Head

by Jeanmarie Stephenson, UC Master Gardener

Gardeners often enthusiastically start new projects that require digging without considering if they have the correct tools or techniques to start the project. Digging doesn't have to be hard on your body, if a gardener takes the time to match the tools to the job and practice proper digging techniques.

Digging can mean one of three things: Simple digging which turns up, loosens or removes earth. Shoveling moves loose material from one place to another. Spading mixes material such as combining compost into soil that has previously been dug. Digging, shoveling, and spading require different tools to do the job efficiently and prevent injury.

The round tip shovel is the tool of choice for **simple digging**. The point of the curved blade focuses the digger's weight on a small area allowing the cutting surface to easily move through the soil. If the soil contains roots or stones, a sharp square-bladed spade will slice through roots and dislodge small stones.



For **shoveling** which moves loose material on a flat surface a square point, flat-backed shovel holds more material than a round point shovel. The round point shovel is best for shoveling soil out of planting holes.

For **spading**, a digging fork works better than using a shovel which can add unnecessary weight and stress on the digger's body. By using smart digging techniques and correct equipment, a gardener can save time, energy, and wear and tear on their bodies.



Digging is easiest if the gardener allows gravity to do most of the work. Gravity pulls straight down so paying attention to the angle at which the shovel is held. Push the handle away until the blade is vertical and add your weight to the shovel by stepping on it. Take thin slices of soil from the sides of the hole. A fully loaded shovel strains the back and tires muscles as well as the tool. Lift the shovel with the muscles in your legs, not your back. Keep your back straight and bend your knees, which transfers the effort of lifting to your stronger legs muscles rather than your back.

Shoveling material that is already loose such as sand, compost, or prepared soil requires a different stance. Shoveling is a horizontal movement. Hold the shovel so the back is on the ground and push into the pile from the end of the shovel. Pushing from the end lets the digger's weight do the work. Bend your knees- not your back- and lift the load.

Spading amendments into loosened soil requires techniques like those used in digging. Plunge the tool straight down into the soil with your back straight and knees bent. Use the spading tool as a lever is the easiest way to begin lifting. Pull the handle toward you, push it down to the ground, and come up with soil. Slide your hand forward, shifting weight from rear foot to forward foot with knees still bent, lift the head of the tool slightly, using leg muscles and turn it over.

Regardless of which kind of digging a gardener does, it is important to pace yourself so you don't get exhausted. Before fatigue sets in, take an occasional brief break, remembering to stay hydrated. Lastly, enjoy the fruits of your labor!

Come learn what to plant and how to garden with the Master Gardeners this Saturday March 15 from 10am to 2pm at our Visalia Garden Festival at Orchard Walk East Shopping Center (Hwy 63 at Riggin Road). Walk through open booth displays on various aspects of gardening. There is no fee, we are family friendly, and we just want to share information about sustainable gardening in the San Joaquin Valley. PLEASE wander through and ask us any and all of your gardening questions

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