



Maintenance of Your Garden Hand Tools

by Anne Skinner, UC Master Gardener

All gardeners have favorite tools we reach for as we head out into the garden. Hand pruners are a popular choice. Providing proper care will make this tool safer to use, produce cleaner cuts on the plants, and last longer.

Sharp hand pruners make a clean cut on plant stems. Dull pruners take more effort to operate, and the result becomes crushing the plant stems. A jagged, crushed cut on a plant stem makes it harder for the plant to heal completely and provides entry points for pests and diseases.

Disinfecting Garden Tools is Important

Fungi, bacteria, and viruses as well as insects can be carried from plant to plant on the surface of your tools. Clean off dirt and debris with a damp cloth or wire brush after use. If you know or suspect the plant you pruned is diseased, then soak the tool in a 10% bleach solution for 30 minutes after cleaning. This solution should be freshly made of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water. Since the bleach solution is corrosive to the tool, it needs to be rinsed well in plain water, dried, and oiled. The tool is now safe to use on another plant or to be stored. Be sure to use bleach solution within 2 hours of mixing as it loses effectiveness. Dispose remaining solution in a household drain, not on the soil.

For routine disinfection, a spray bottle with 70% alcohol will accomplish basic decontamination of the pruner's cutting surfaces and is easy to carry along in the garden. Also unlike bleach, alcohol is not corrosive to tools and is effective almost immediately. So tools do not need to be soaked in the alcohol or rinsed in plain water. However they should be occasionally oiled.

Many household disinfectant products can be utilized for cleaning tools, but little research has been done to evaluate individual products. Still using them is better than using nothing.

Once the tool is clean, inspect it for loose components, damage to the cutting surfaces or broken handles. For your safety, as well as prolonging the utility of the tool, it is important to have it operating properly. If there is significant damage to the cutting surface, a professional tool sharpening service should be used.

Keep Garden Tools Sharp

Some basic equipment is needed to maintain a sharp cutting edge on garden tools: a sharpening tool or stone, oil (linseed, motor, vegetable), fine steel wool, gloves to protect your hands, and goggles to protect your eyes.



Sharpening the cutting blade removes some of the metal to restore the angle or bevel of the edge. It is important to maintain the factory bevel as when the tool was new. Removing too much of the angle will weaken the cutting edge and reduce the lifespan of the tool.

Pruning tools are available in bypass and anvil configurations, so how to sharpen them is slightly different. A **bypass pruner** has a stainless steel curved blade that uses a scissors action to pass next to (not on top of) the lower arm or hook. The hook is designed to catch and hold the branch, while the cutting blade comes down. Bypass pruners offer a clean cut, as the blade slices all the way through the stem. An **anvil pruner** has a top blade which closes down on top of a flat base, called the anvil jaw. The anvil is usually made of soft metal or hard plastic. The force makes cutting thick branches easier, but tends to crush smaller plant stems.

To sharpen a bypass pruner blade

Hold the open pruner flat in one hand and with the other hand place the sharpener at a 20 degree angle along the bevel side of the blade. Move the sharpener in one direction only, with smooth strokes from base to end 4 to 5 times. Turn the pruner over so the flat side of the blade is facing up and slide the sharpener flush along the unbeveled edge to remove burrs created by sharpening the cutting blade. A bench vise can also be used to hold the tool during sharpening, taking care not to over tighten the vise which can bend the tool.

To sharpen an anvil pruner blade

Check to see if the cutting blade is double-beveled or single-beveled with a flat back. Sharpen the single-beveled blade the same as a bypass pruner. A double-beveled blade is sharpened on both sides until new metal is visible along the full length of each. The last step is to smooth each side with the sharpener to create a finished edge. Over time, the gap between the anvil and blade increases, which causes poor cutting results and indicates a need for new pruners.

Getting the tool ready to use

Apply oil around the center bolt and open and close the tool about 10 times to work it in. Use the steel wool to rub the oil over the cutting surfaces. Spray the tool with alcohol and wipe with a paper towel.

I have an inexpensive 10 year-old hand pruner which looks almost new and is very easy to use.

I follow the steps above and the few minutes of time are well spent. Gardening tools are expensive. Proper tool care will make them last longer, be better for your plants, and make them easier to use.

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