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Cleaning and Caring for Your Garden Tools During Winter

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With autumn weather moving in and summer gardens fading, it's time to think about caring for our gardening tools and getting them ready to use in the spring. Cleaning and maintaining your tools during the winter months can help save you money and ensure that you have sharp tools handy when the first signs of spring appear. Clean tools prevent the spread of diseases, and sharp blades make it easier on you and the plants you are trimming. Besides, it's no fun to miss out on spring planting and pruning because your tools are in the repair shop. The following are some useful tips for cleaning, maintaining and storing gardening tools.

Let's start with cleaning and disinfecting tools. Use soap and water to remove dirt and dried-on materials from tool surfaces. Steel brushes made for cleaning grills work really well for removing stubborn clumps of dirt. Sandpaper or steel wool works well to remove rust and dried sap from metal surfaces. Once your tools are clean, disinfect all surfaces that come in contact with soil by dipping them in a solution of one part non-chlorine bleach to four parts water. You'll also want to disinfect seedling trays and used pots so that they are ready to be put to use.

Now that your tools are clean, inspect the edges of shovels, hoes and trowels for chips or dents and use a combination of coarse and fine files to create a smooth edge. For bladed tools such as pruners, sharpen the blades by following the original angle of the blade's bevel. Be sure to clean and lubricate all pivot points.

Inspect the handles of your tools to make sure they are in good repair. If the wooden handles on your tools are rough or splintered, sand down the handles and apply a coat of linseed oil to prevent the wood from cracking. Be sure to wipe off any excess oil to prevent the handles from getting sticky.

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Last, but not least, coat the metal parts of your tools with a light coat of oil and store in a dry place. Another way to store long handled tools and keep them from rusting is to insert them blade down in a large bucket filled with sand and oil (such as vegetable oil or motor oil). Wipe down the blades with a cloth prior to using them.

For power tools such as mowers and weed trimmers, scrape the undercarriage with a putty knife to remove excess grass and weeds, which are acidic and can lead to rust. Have the mower blades professionally sharpened over the winter so that they will be ready to go in the spring. Be sure to inspect moving parts for wear and tear and tighten up any loose nuts or bolts.

If your mower or weed trimmer will sit idle during the winter, consider draining the fuel so that it will not dry and gum up the fuel lines. Remove and recycle motor oil and check spark plugs and filters. It's also a good time to check pull cords and electrical cords, and to remove and store batteries.

For sprayers, be sure to empty them and properly dispose of the contents. Then thoroughly flush the sprayer with soap and water before storing it.

Don't forget a little TLC for wheelbarrows and garden carts - be sure to check their tires for cracking or splitting and to make sure the tires are properly inflated.

On Saturday, October 19, from 9 AM to 2 PM, join Master Gardeners in the Sherwood Demonstration Garden at 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville, CA, 95667, for a presentation on yard and garden clean up, cool season planting, tool sharpening and cleaning, composting, mulching and pruning, and watch first-hand examples of how to "put your garden to bed" for the winter. For more information go to: <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/>.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.