



## WINTER IS A GOOD TIME FOR TOOL MAINTENANCE

by Marie Woodward, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Winter can be a quiet time for gardeners, which is a good time to get your tools ready for the upcoming season. Nothing beats a nice sharp tool. Shovels cut turf and stubborn roots more easily and flat edge shovels make for nice clean garden bed borders. Well-edged tools also help reduce physical strain on the body. And, because sharp pruners and loppers make cleaner cuts when pruning trees and shrubs, plants heal faster, reducing the opportunity for pests or diseases to infect them.

Winter is also a good time to inspect and repair tools. It may take a little elbow grease to bring your garden armory back into tip-top shape (especially if it's been a while since tools were last maintained), but you'll reap the benefits all season long. And, with regular maintenance, it will only take a few minutes in the future. Here are some tips for cleaning and preparing gardens for the growing season ahead.



First, gather the tools you wish to clean and sharpen. Using a bucket with water, mild soap and a scrub brush, clean tools of any loose debris. Next, spray them with a bubble-type cleaner (like Scrubbing Bubbles) and let them sit for a few minutes. This helps to soften sap and rust. Using a steel wool pad, give your tools a good scrub. If needed, repeat this process until you're happy with the result. Rinse and dry off completely. Now you're ready to sharpen.

When sharpening a shovel, edging tool, or trowels, a 6-inch mill file works great to sharpen the rounded edges. They don't need to be razor sharp but creating a nice "edge" will make shoveling or edging your garden bed much easier. To sharpen, find the bevel at the edge, place the file at a 45-degree angle and "push" the file away from the blade. Then lift the file and bring it back to the starting point and push again. It's important to sharpen in one direction, not a back-and-forth motion. This will ensure a clean sharp edge. Once the edge is to your satisfaction, wipe the tool down with lubricating oil. A light layer of vegetable oil works great, but any waterless oil will do. This protects tools from rust and corrosion. Now is also a good time to inspect wooden handles. They can be sanded smooth or replaced if cracked or weak. Apply a thin coat of linseed oil to the handle. This both protects and seals the wood.



To clean loppers and pruners, repeat the cleaning process as before. You may need a small wire brush to help get into tight spots better. Then, wash them off and dry thoroughly. A small carbide stone works best for sharpening small blades like pruners and loppers. Cradle the pruner or lopper in your hand and lay the stone on the beveled edge of the blade. Using a sweeping motion, lightly move the stone along the blade in one direction a few strokes, checking the blade periodically for sharpness. Check the other side of the blade for any burrs, (small bumps), that may have developed. Laying the stone flat against the back side of the blade, smooth with stone to remove them.

Once the blades are smooth and sharp, apply 3 in 1 oil around the mechanism. Open and close several times to help spread the oil throughout the mechanism. This lubricates and protects the area from rust or corrosion.

Usually, tool maintenance only needs to be done once a year, before the beginning, or better yet, at the end of the season. However, if your tools are heavily used, you may need to show your tools a little love more often. To see the complete process with photos visit:

<https://uconnladybug.wordpress.com/2023/02/10/winter-is-a-good-time-for-tool-maintenance/>

For all your gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or [www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu) or your local Cooperative Extension Center.