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News Release

### **Selecting the right garden tools for the job**

**Question:** As a vegetable and ornamental gardener, I'm fascinated by the variety of garden tools available at gardening supply sources and 'big-box' retailers. What are the best tools for gardeners who want 'quality' over 'quantity'?

**Answer:** While I don't mean to side-step your question, the response offered by most gardening experts and instructors is "it depends."

While we have access to many mechanical "wonders" that supposedly make gardening easier on our backs, legs and hands, gardening tools have been part of our heritage for many years. And it is many of these hand-operated tools that connect us to our gardens in the most intimate way, from sight to sound to smell.

The next time you reach for a well-worn shovel or favorite hand pruner, think about our ancestors and the garden tools they used. It may surprise you to find not a lot has changed in hundreds of years, although the value we attach to our garden tools has.

Today when we need a new tool, or have finally, irrevocably lost our most prized pruners, we drive a few miles to our nearest home improvement store to purchase a mass-produced, relatively inexpensive, and easily disposed of, implement. However, it wasn't so long ago that our primarily agrarian society regarded tools used in planting and cultivating to be extremely valuable. Lives depended on garden tools – we fed ourselves and our families on what we grew, so their value was much higher. Unfortunately, that made tools highly sought after targets for thieves, as exemplified by a gentleman who, in 1763 went with his local constable (police) to find where four of his grubbing hoes, four shovels, and two spades had been hidden in the ground. Even during the Revolutionary War, in 1778, one farmer advertised for the return of prized possessions that included spades, garden hoes and dung forks, offering a reward for any 'trouble or expense' involved in the safe return of them.

And while we don't think twice about replacing 3 or 4 items every season, usually due to our own carelessness (OK, I did forget that my hand pruners fell in the compost bin), those efforts at retrieval by our forefathers were for good reason. In the not so distant past, and before the days of mass production, garden tools were custom made and hard to come by – they were critical items of commerce in the Colonies. Tradesmen (many were blacksmiths) practiced their craft in cities and towns – locally produced – and it took days to create and assemble tools. Therefore, it was not uncommon for garden tools to be locked up inside the home. In a society where food

shortages remained a constant threat and gardens literally meant the difference between eating and starving, tools really were more valuable than diamonds!

Naturally, for those who could afford the shipping expense, there were import houses; these firms offered hatchets, trowels, and weeding hoes from Europe, along with more exotic dry hides, sherry wine, almonds, and “bottled porter.”

The first woody plant intentionally pruned by man is believed to have been Armenian grapevines around 6000 B.C. Bronze spades that closely resemble our modern ones were utilized by the Chinese in 1100 B.C. But it was the industrial revolution (18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century) that introduced steel and alloys, and with them tools that were lighter and much more durable.

The popularity of gardens grew tremendously by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, and following that interest and demand for equipment, came tools and accessories created for specific garden purposes. Hedge shears, pruning shears, cultivating forks, trowels – most manual garden tools available today were on the list of gardeners who had everything. So today, when you reach for a new pruner ordered from a recently received gardener’s supply catalogue, consider that the items is basically the same as one crafted in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century.

But back to the original issue of quality vs quantity. Truthfully, gardening basics means you’re digging or cutting, so the variety of tools needed is not extremely broad. Many gardeners (and most common sense), vote for the highest-quality tools as they will last longer, work more efficiently, and feel more comfortable in your hands. If you’re a person who takes care of tools, and has the budget to afford them, “quality” makes sense.

However, if you tend to “misplace” items, find them outdoors 3 months after their last use, or can’t remember to order replacement parts or have blades sharpened in a timely manner, “quantity” may be more appropriate for you. And even the less expensive tools work well for a time, with a minimum of care.

Most gardeners in this area keep a D-grip spade, a spading fork, and hand pruners (both bypass and anvil) on hand as part of their ‘garden basics.’ Add to those items as budget allows and need arises.

Finally, the importance of gardening tools is increasing as more of us are gardening, many for the purpose of feeding ourselves, our families, and our communities. Perhaps we really aren’t so different from those who valued their garden implements as highly as their family silverware!

For more information regarding horticulture related questions, please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent at the St. Clair County Extension office by calling (205) 338-9416 or email [leesall@aces.edu](mailto:leesall@aces.edu).