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Give Your Garden Tools a Little TLC

By Charlie Basham

UCCE Master Gardener El Dorado County

It's hard to know exactly when to call it quits with the yard work and welcome in the winter. Murphy's Law dictates that the day after you've trimmed, raked and mowed your yard for the last time of the season, a two-week burst of warm weather will bring back the greenery – ironically, much thicker and lusher than ever before!

Murphy's Law aside, when the growing season finally ends there's still one last chore to finish before hanging up the garden gloves. Before you put your tools away for their long winter's nap give them a little TLC (tender loving care). This will help extend their life, protect your investment and make gardening a lot more pleasant next spring.

The first protective step is to give all your hand tools a thorough cleaning. With soap and water scrub away the dirt and plant matter with a stiff-bristled wire brush. Rinse with clear water and dry with a clean cloth. For really caked-on material, try soaking the tool in a bucket of water for a while. (Note: Obviously the above tips do not apply to electric tools!)

Remove the rust spots with a fine sandpaper or steel wool. This is also the time to remove the nicks and burrs and sharpen the edges of the digging tools like the shovel and hoe. If you do this yourself use a whetstone or file. Work the cutting edge at a 45-degree angle, starting at the outer edge and moving toward the center. Many hardware stores also offer a sharpening service for a small fee. Wear heavy gloves when cleaning or sharpening the tools, and goggles when using the wire brush.

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Next, apply a light coating of a water displacing lubricant to all the metal parts to prevent rusting and corrosion. This is also the time to squirt a little lubricant into the moving parts on the loppers, nippers and hedge trimmers. You can also lightly sand and then wipe down the wood handles with a lubricant or paste wax to preserve the wood and prevent cracking, splitting and splinters.

When you're certain the lawn has finished growing for the season, siphon out the remaining gas from the mower's tank or run it until it runs out of gas. Just don't leave the fuel in the tank! Over time the gas can degrade and condensation could build up. There are products that will help stabilize fuel so it can be stored over the winter, but the surefire method is to drain the tank dry.

Changing the mower's spark plug and sharpening the blades now will save you some time next spring. If your garden equipment has a 4-cycle engine, drain and replace the crankcase oil. Clean the top and underside of the machine by scraping off the caked-on organic materials and wipe off any accumulated oil. Lubricate the moving parts, like the cables, according to the manufacturer's directions. Clean or replace the air filter.

If you expect to use a chain saw this winter, now's the time to give it a thorough cleaning and top off the fluids. Many local hardware stores will sharpen the chain for very little cost. Plus, you may also want to buy a spare chain for backup.

All garden tools need to be stored in a dry location, especially the electric tools. After cleaning the electric tools carefully check the cord and extension cord for breaks in the protective insulation. Even a small crack can be dangerous! If the cord is damaged, replace it immediately or get it repaired by a qualified electrician.

After a long growing season and a summer full of weekend yard projects, tools and equipment often end up in places they don't belong. This might be the best time to organize the storage area.

Hoses should be brought indoors for the winter. Be sure they are drained and coiled without kinks. Leaks can be fixed quickly and easily with simple hose repair kits. You should also replace the rubber washers on the fittings.

If you take the time now to give your tools a little TLC before you put them away for the winter, they can last for a lifetime. Next spring, when the days are warmer and it's time to get into the garden, your clean and sharpened tools will make the tasks much easier and a lot more enjoyable.

No room -- or water -- for a large garden? Join UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado Julianne Melchor as she teaches you how to create a miniature garden in a decorative container at this Saturday's free Master Gardener class: Container Gardening. Ideas can be translated to an outdoor landscape as well as container gardening in general. The November 15th class is at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane in Placerville, from 9 a.m to noon.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and

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activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and <http://www.facebook.com/pages/El-Dorado-County-Master-Gardeners/164653119129>.