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**Give Your Garden Tools a Little TLC**  
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Yup, winter's coming. Every day seems to get a little colder and darker, earlier than the day before. The leaves are falling like sheets of rain and the outdoor plants have slipped into hibernation. For most of us these are the telltale signs that it's time to close up the tool shed and forget about gardening until spring. But, before you hang up those garden gloves, there's still one final task you really need to tackle.

You need to give your garden tools some TLC before their long winter's nap. Yes, I know, we're all pretty much burned out after our dry summer scorcher. But a little extra effort with your tools now will make gardening much more enjoyable next season. Plus it'll help extend the life of your tools.

The first step is to give all your garden tools a good cleaning. With a bucket of warm water and a wire brush, scrub away the caked-on mud, dirt, and plant matter. Then rinse and dry the tools. For the really tough chunks of mud, soak the tool in that water bucket for a while. (Note: These tips obviously do not apply to electric tools!)

It's always a good idea to remove any rust. Use a fine sandpaper or steel wool and then wipe the tool clean. A light coating of vegetable oil will help prevent rust from reoccurring over the winter.

Take a close look at the edges of your digging and cutting tools. They probably need a good sharpening. Many hardware stores offer a sharpening service for a small fee, but it's a simple enough task that you can do yourself. Using a whetstone or file, work the cutting edge at a 45-degree angle. Start at the outer edge and move toward the center. *Be sure to wear heavy gloves and eye protection!* This is also the time to lubricate the moving parts on the loppers, nippers and hedge trimmers with a squirt of a water displacing solvent.

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For wooden-handled tools, lightly sand them down, wipe clean, and apply a thin layer of linseed oil or paste wax. This will help preserve the wood and prevent cracking or splinters!

Gas powered lawn mowers, blowers and weed trimmers all need special winter prep. The first step is to drain the gas tank or run the motor until the tank is empty. You want to get rid of this gas because it can degrade and won't ignite easily after storage. In the spring it will make the machines work harder... if they start at all. There are additives that help stabilize fuel so it can be stored over winter, but the surefire method is to drain the tank dry.

You may also want to drain the oil. It becomes thick and sludgy when it is stored in the cold and tools won't run well. If your equipment has a 4-cycle engine, drain and replace the crankcase oil. Clean the machine by scraping off the caked-on organic materials and wipe off accumulated oil. Lubricate the moving parts, like the throttle cables, according to the manufacturer's directions. Clean or replace the air filter and change the oil and sparkplug. Sharpening the blades will save you some time next season, too.

If you're planning to use a chain saw any time soon, now's the time to give it a thorough cleaning and top off the fluids. Local hardware stores can sharpen the chain for very little cost. Plus, you may also want to get a spare chain for backup.

After cleaning your (unplugged) 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 have it repaired by a qualified electrician.

After a busy summer of weekend garden projects, it's not uncommon for tools and equipment to end up where they don't belong. Now's the time to organize the storage area. All your tools need to be stored in a dry location, especially the electric tools.

Hoses should be stored indoors for the winter. They need to be completely drained and coiled up without kinks. Leaks can be fixed easily and inexpensively with simple hose repair kits from the hardware store. You should also replace the rubber washers on all the fittings.

If you take the time to maintain your gardening tools before you put them away for the winter, they can last for many years. Next spring, when the days grow longer and warmer and it's time to get into the garden, your clean and sharpened tools will make the tasks much easier and much more enjoyable.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news). You can also find us on Facebook.