

## Turn annual tool cleaning into friendly, practical fun

Mark asks, "I took my tools to your school once and got **help cleaning and sharpening** my clippers, shovel and weeders. Do you still do that?"

One of my students began that tradition, Mark. It was such productive fun that I couldn't bear to see it end when the school closed. So with my friend and fellow instructor Pam Palechek I co-hosted a tool cleaning party and pot luck last weekend. We invited everyone who's helped at the Detroit Zoo Adopt-a-Garden. About thirty people came bearing close to 200 tools and two dozen delicious entrees. It was great fun.

Here's **my recipe** for that event. Why not **host your own tool-cleaning party**?

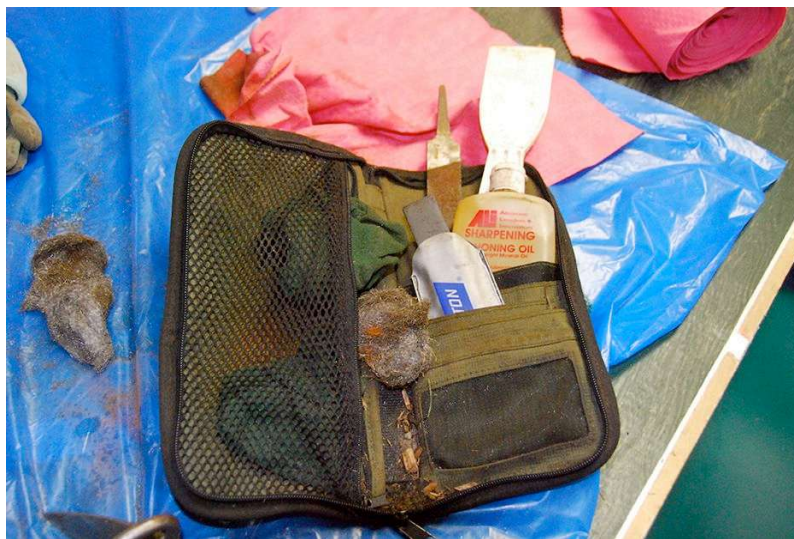
At right, Tom Theoret, Linda Pulnicki, Phil Gigliotti, Priscilla Needle and Deb Hall put their heads and tool care supplies together. Below, the mini-tool care kit I carry with me every day. Photos ©2009 Steven Nikkila



### All you need for tool care

Here is what I lay out at a tool care party and what we do with them.

All of this is available at a hardware store or in a department store tools section. Take the list with you and ask for help filling it -- you're likely to collect additional tool care tips from the store staff.



### Cover work station surface with plastic sheet or tarp.

### Clean dirt, rust and sap from blades.

Scrape, coat lightly with oil, wait, then scrape again, using:

- **Plastic scraper** (I use a plastic putty knife, as shown above)
- **Stiff brush** like a nylon bristle scrub brush or wire brush\*
- **WD40 oil or mineral oil**
- **"Scratch pad"** (heavy duty, soap-free scouring pad)
- **Steel wool\*** (soap-free)
- **Turpentine** or degreaser such as Goo-gone
- **Rags**

\*I've heard to avoid wire brushes, sandpaper, or steel wool as they scratch the metal surfaces. I haven't seen negative effects and still swear by steel wool.



### Sharpen blades.

Hone, file or grind to remove burrs. Work only on the beveled side of a blade on a bypass cutting tool (scissor-type cutting action). Move the file or stone along the blade in just one direction, usually from tip toward base. Avoid back-and forth motions which can leave burrs on the cutting edge. You will need:

- An oiled **honing stone** (you might use "sharpening oil" but WD40 or 3-in-1 are okay)
- Small and medium **flat files** ("flat bastard" file, right)
- **Grinder** -- hand-operated, electric bench-mounted or a grinding wheel attachment for an electric rotary tool such as made by Dremel. Never grind to the point of visibly heating the metal, which can cause steel to lose its temper and nevermore be able to hold an edge. (Maddie Laule puts a new edge on a trowel using her Dremel tool and a grinding bit: Below, right.)
- A **vise or clamp** can be handy to hold a blade as you hone or grind. (Edging tool, clamped as it's sharpened, right)



### Disassemble tools if necessary to sharpen the blades

- Assortment of **screwdrivers** and **wrenches**

### Tackle saw sharpening only if you have special files:

- Very small files with surfaces that match the bevel on the saw tooth.

### Oil gears, springs, joints, etc.

Remove any dirt. **Old toothbrushes** and degreaser come in handy. Operate the mechanism as you apply **WD40 or 3-in-1 oil** to work lubricant onto interior/hidden surfaces.

### Maintain wooden handles.

Remove dirt and sap. Sand rough spots. Apply oil:

- **Turpentine** or degreaser /Goo-gone
- Rags
- **Sand paper** (medium and fine grit)
- **Linseed oil**



### Prevent rust's return.

Apply a thin layer of **WD40 oil** to metal surfaces.

Open your basement to friends, line up a few basic tools and have a great time!

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Many people are surprised to hear they should sharpen a shovel or spade. Without a sharp edge, digging's harder work than it should be. These tools don't usually come with an edge but await the user's file. ("Why" they aren't sharpened by the manufacturer is a mystery -- perhaps they are too dangerous to ship when sharpened.)

Tom Theoret (right) did more than give his shovel one edge, he notched it. Darl Slentz uses a power grinder to sharpen its teeth.  
Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

### Short report from the field:

Fran wrote to comment on last week's item on Rex begonia care: "Your **begonia discussion was excellent**. I went to one of the suggested web sites, also excellent. I do the begonias at the Cranbrook greenhouse. **My mantra is do not water the begonias**. When people bring unhappy begonias in, I find the **main problem is over watering**. When greenhouse volunteers see a begonia drooping, they think it must be dry and run to the nearest sprinkling can. Actually, begonias (and other plants) very often droop from too much rather than too little water."

### This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

**Sort seeds** I'm thinking about growing this year.

My first sort is by germination requirements as explained on the seed package, catalog or growing guide:

- All **those that sprout best when warm** will start together in my furnace room. Not because they need it *that* warm (see "Plant's-eye view", page 7) but because that room has no windows. Spaces near my 1950's leaky windows often fall to below 50°F at night).
- Species that **prefer cool** can bunk in the unheated back room or be direct-sown outdoors any time now.