

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



December 3, 2022

## Winterize Tools to Protect Them and Your Plants

Gardening tools make tasks easier. Extend their usefulness by wintering them. This includes disinfecting the tools to prevent the spread of diseases to other plants. Take the time to protect your investment and have them clean and ready for gardening tasks. Remember to maintain the lawn mower too.

To start winterizing tools, wash soil off shovels, hand trowels, hoes, and rakes with strong streams of water. Cleaning products such as dish detergent or liquid hand soap can be used with a brush or broom. A stick, block of wood, or wire bush can be used to scrape off stuck soil. Avoid soaking a tool in water for a long period of time because rust develops on the metal parts.

Small spots of hard-to-remove soil and rust can be eliminated with steel wool or sandpaper. Rinse after using a cleaner and dry the tools to avoid the formation of rust.

Even though the soil is removed from the tool and looks clean, it may carry fungal, bacterial, and viral plant pathogens that can be spread to healthy plants. Organic matter inhibits the disinfection process. Disinfecting the tool may include a soak, dip, or spray. The length of time the product needs to stay in contact with the surface to kill or inactivate pathogens depends

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on the product. Products such as household cleaners like Lysol™ and 70% rubbing alcohol require contact for 3 to 5 minutes to effectively sanitize. Examples of common household products to disinfect tools include, 70% rubbing alcohol, hand sanitizer, antimicrobial bathroom cleaner, or 10% bleach solution (mix 9 parts water with 1 part bleach). Never mix bleach with other cleaning products because a toxic gas may be produced.

After the product is sanitized, rinse thoroughly because some products such as bleach may corrode tools and metal surfaces. Dry the tools to keep them from rusting.

Apply a coat of oil to prevent rust from forming on metal parts on the tools during storage. Rub the metal parts with an oil-soaked rag or spray the parts with oil. Sewing machine oil may be used. Do not use vegetable oil.

Before putting the oil away, use it to winterize pruning tools such as hand pruners, loppers, and pruning saws. Clean debris and sticky sap off the metal blades. Disinfect the blades as well. Sharpen the blades. Replace deeply grooved and notched ones. A sharp blade makes the pruning job faster and results in an even, smooth cut which is better for the plant. Lightly oil the metal blades to keep them from rusting.

Next, check the handles of the tools. Tighten loose screws and nuts and replace missing ones. Replace broken and cracked handles. Sand rough areas on wooden handles until smooth. The handles may need painting, varnishing, or rubbing with linseed oil to protect the wood. Painting the handles with a bright color such as orange or red makes the tool easier to find in the garden or lawn.

Fiberglass handles should be inspected for splintering. If necessary, wrap the handles with electrician's tape.

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The metal blades of hoes, shovels, and tiller tines should be sharpened. A sharp edge makes the job easier and faster.

One way to store hand tools is to hang them on a wall or pegboard. This protects the blades of the tools to keep them sharp and makes them easier to find. Tracing an outline of the tool on the pegboard lets everyone know where it is stored. This also helps to keep an inventory of the tools.

Lawn mowers, tillers, and other power equipment should be cleaned as well. The underside of the lawn mower deck is easy to forget. Layers of grass clippings develop underneath the deck. After cleaning, repaint the deck with metal paint if needed or use oil to condition it.

Change the oil in power equipment to prevent engine sludge that can cause the internal engine parts and seals to deteriorate. Add fresh oil of the proper viscosity according to the owner's manual.

Clean or change the air filter if it wasn't done during the mowing season. A dirty air filter can restrict airflow into the engine and cause the engine to run inefficiently.

Check the spark plug to be sure it's not fouled and is properly gapped. Disconnecting the spark plug for the winter is also suggested.

Gasoline should not be left in the fuel tank. Water can condense in the fuel tank and cause problems with starting the mower or it runs poorly in the spring. Run the mower out of gas after the last mowing or drain it. You can do this yourself or have a professional do it as part of an annual service. Consult the owner's manual for more winterizing details.

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Sharpen the blades of mowers. Replace blades with deep nicks. A dull lawn mower blade increases fuel consumption and wear on the engine, belts, and bearings. Also, a dull mower blade tears off the grass leaf, which increases the grass' susceptibility to diseases.

For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or [Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu). "Cleaning & Disinfecting Home Garden Tools & Equipment" publication is available at <http://plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/files/ppfs-gen-17.pdf>.

**Annette's tip:**

Make sure to constantly keep water in the tree stand of a fresh cut Christmas Tree. Check the stand daily. Current research shows that only water is needed in the stand and other materials are not required to prolong the life of the tree.

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