

**Janet B. Carson**  
**Extension Horticulture Specialist**  
**Arkansas Democrat-Gazette**  
**October Feature - garden tool storage**

Although we have finally gotten a break in the weather and fall seems to have arrived, many gardeners struggled through September and early October and are ready to throw in the trowel. If your gardening season is coming to an end, take time and winterize your garden tools. A little extra time spent now will reward you in the spring when you are ready to start gardening and your tools are in great working order.

Many gardeners have had the experience of dumping things in the shed at the end of the season to find that the lawn mower or tiller won't start the following spring or the blades on their pruning shears are rusted and dull and won't cut a twig. Then they get behind waiting to get them fixed, or even worse, having to buy a new one. A few simple steps of maintenance for each tool and instead of frustration, you can begin to garden next spring.

Any garden tools that use oil and gas need special attention like lawn mowers, tillers and some weed trimmers. For your last use of the season, try to run the tool out of gas. If gas sits in the mower all winter unused it can absorb water which will make your motor run rough. Some recommend funneling the leftover gas out of the tool and using it in your car, but that can be tricky, so just keep mowing to let it run dry. Then drain the oil before you store the equipment for the winter. Oil becomes thick and sludgy when it is unused and cold, and your equipment won't run as well. Most equipment has a plug under the motor. Just put a catch basin under it and pull the plug and catch the oil. Clean your equipment well before storing. Dirt and clumped on grass left on the equipment can lead to rust. If you sharpen your own blades, do it before storing, or take them in to a repair shop for sharpening. This will save you time next spring when you need to mow for the first time. Check your lawn mower and replace any worn parts. Clean the spark plugs or replace them. Over time, they become crusted with dirt and debris.

Just like mentioned above for the gas powered machines, try to use up the gas in your gas cans at the end of the season, or add the gas to your car's tank. Left in the can all winter the fuel will absorb water and won't be as good for your equipment next spring. Buy fresh gas right before you need it next spring.

In a perfect world, shovels, pruners and other garden tools should be cleaned each time we use them, but in reality we often stack them in the shed and move on each week as we are gardening. Before they rest for the winter, clean them thoroughly. Some gardeners have a bucket filled with sand that they dump in spent motor oil or linseed oil. (Linseed oil is more garden friendly than motor oil.) They put their shovels into this to help clean off any residue and oil the blades at the same time. It would be best to clean and dry them first, then dipping in the sand/oil mix. If any rust has accumulated throughout the season use either steel wool or a fine sandpaper to get the rust off, then coat with oil. If you don't have a bucket of sand, simply clean the tools and dry them, then lightly coat the metal parts with oil-- linseed oil or even vegetable oil will work. A light coating of oil can prevent rust on the metal portion of the tool and will prevent drying and cracking of the wooden handles. If you have tools where the

wooden handles have already cracked or are rough, sand them down and then liberally apply linseed oil. If they are too far gone but the tool is in good shape, go to the local hardware store and buy a replacement handle. This is much cheaper than buying a new good tool.

By the time we have used a garden tool all season, many of them are quite dull. While some gardeners sharpen their tools periodically throughout the season, others do so once a year. Why not get this done at the end of the season so you can hit the ground running next spring. Whether you are sharpening a hoe or a pruning device, there are many tools available to the home gardener to sharpen your own tools at home. Whether you use a whetstone or a file, or a specialized tool, always start at the outer edge and move toward the center. Once they are sharp, oil the blades lightly and store.

Last but not least are your water hoses. As winter sets in, try to coil them and store in a protected spot (out of the weather). If you find any leaks or tears in the hoses, there are inexpensive repair kits available at a hardware store. We occasionally need to water plants in the winter months if it is really dry. Keep one hose ready for use if needed.

Good gardening tools are expensive. With just a little bit of time and care, they can last for years.