

Tillage Tools

TILLAGE TOOLS



Weed Hook Photo credit: Steve Maxwell

The weed hook is a sturdy, field-proven gardening tool for slicing roots just below ground level.



Tiller bucket

If your garden soil is stony, consider mounting a plastic bucket on your rototiller. Pick up the stones and drop them in the pail as you till.

Photo credit: Steve Maxwell



Hoe Sharpen

Every hoe works best if it's sharp. A few minutes work with a flat file makes for much easier, more effective weeding.

Photo credit: Steve Maxwell

Nobody takes up gardening because they're eager to hack at weed-infested soil. You might tolerate this chore for a while, but sooner or later one of two things will happen. Either you'll give up on any sort of serious gardening after you decide that tillage is too time consuming and painful, or you'll get pretty good at the job. How you emerge from this trial depends on your

knowledge of today's best tillage tools, and an understanding of how to use them -- all combined with a little patience.

Twenty years ago my wife and I were inexperienced gardeners foolish enough to think that an ordinary garden hoe was all we really needed to make things grow. Struggles with poor, ill-designed tools has shown us what works, what doesn't and exactly how to get the most tillage work done with the least amount of effort. If there are better ways to keep soil light, fluffy and weed free, we don't know about them. The tools I'll show you here are all part of our long-refined tillage system.

We've run an 8 hp Honda rototiller since 1992 and there are two things I like about it. Besides proving absolutely reliable and surprisingly quiet, our model includes wheel weights that help it plough through the heavy soil at our place – even while breaking sod. You might not need a full-sized rototiller if you're taking over a small collection of existing gardens, but if you're creating new plots or dealing with annual beds totaling more than about 300 sq. ft., then you won't regret investing in a big tiller.

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Does your soil have stones? I bolted a 4 litre plastic pail to the back of the machine, to help get rid of stones. I just grab them as they come to the surface while tilling, then drop them in the pail. Stony ground becomes clean in three or four years without any extra time or labour.

It took us a while to add a tiny, gas-powered tiller to our collection of essential gardening tools, but we should have done it sooner. The small size offers a useful transition between the big tiller and our collection of hand hoes. It's not that we're lazy, it's just that power tillage is so much more effective because it stirs up the soil more thoroughly.

A wheel hoe is an old-time gardening tool that harnesses the power of your entire body to slice weeds and stir up the soil, and modern versions are exceptionally effective. We've tried several brands over the years, but the one we've stuck with combines a stirrup-shaped hoe suspended underneath a rolling body. It's great for weeding between rows of small vegetable and transplants.

Two kinds of full-size hand hoes are favourites at our place: a precision "collinear" hoe, and a stirrup hoe. Both are designed to slice weeds below the surface, unlike ordinary hoes that are best design to move soil around while pulling your shoulder muscles in the bargain. Add to these a hooked hand weeder, and the only thing more you need is a little elbow grease and some patience.

The phrase "dull as a hoe" wasn't coined by a gardening expert. That's because all kinds of hoes need to be sharp if they're to work right. The job doesn't take long, either. A 10"-long flat file and a vise are all you need. With the right gear -- properly selected and sharpened -- tilling your garden might even become something you look forward to -- at least a little, anyway.

■ *Steve Maxwell is technical editor of Canadian Home Workshop magazine. Send questions to steve@stevemaxwell.ca. Letter volume may prevent individual response.*

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