

It's tool time



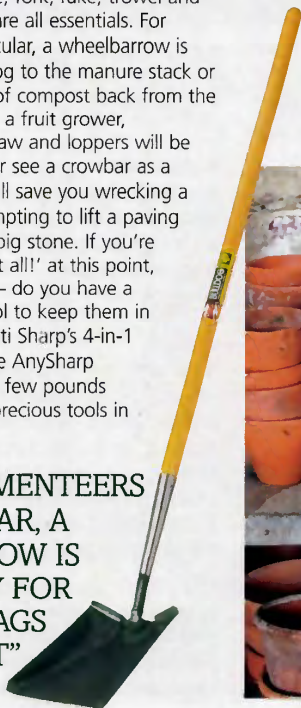
If you're kitting yourself out with some tools for the growing season ahead, follow Jane Perrone's very sensible advice before making the final selection

They say a bad workman always blames his tools: well if 2011 was a disappointing growing year for you, maybe it's time to splash out on some new gardening equipment. Or perhaps you're new to the GYO game and want to kit out your shed: either way, it's wise to do some research before shelling out on a fancy-looking spade that gives you blisters or, worse yet, backache.

Essential equipment

So what should the GYOer's basic toolkit contain? A spade, hoe, fork, rake, trowel and hand fork, and knife are all essentials. For allotmenters in particular, a wheelbarrow is very handy for that slog to the manure stack or for carrying that bag of compost back from the trading shed. If you're a fruit grower, secateurs, a pruning saw and loppers will be invaluable. And I never see a crowbar as a bad investment – it will save you wrecking a good fork when attempting to lift a paving slab or digging out a big stone. If you're smugly thinking 'got it all!' at this point, here's the final check – do you have a decent sharpening tool to keep them in good order? I like Multi Sharp's 4-in-1 tool sharpener and the AnySharp Edge: and for under a few pounds either will keep your precious tools in good nick for years.

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Real investments


You can pay anything from a tenner and up for the bigger tools: however a really decent spade or fork with a wooden shaft made of ash and a forged steel head from the likes of Sneeboer, Bulldog or Burgon & Ball could set you back £30-£100, but should come with a good guarantee of 10 years or more and last you a lifetime of gardening if you take good care. If money really is no object – or you fancy adding something special to your birthday list – you really can't beat the bronze-headed tools made by Implementations. They are beautifully crafted, come with a lifetime guarantee, and the bronze is even reputed to repel slugs and snails. The downside of the combination of wood and metal is weight: if you



prefer a lightweight tool, there are other options made from aluminium, carbon fibre or plastic. These tools can be hard on the hands, so go for a make that has soft-grip handles – I like Fiskars' Garden Light range.

On a budget?

It's a false economy to buy cheap tools, or so goes the old adage. But that's no good if you don't have the spare cash for a decent set from new – after all, one of the reasons many of us grow veg is to save money. Seek out good quality secondhand tools instead. It's not as hard as you'd think: first, ask around among friends and family – you may be surprised what they have lying around that they'll give or lend you. Or go online and visit community recycling sites such as Freecycle and Freegle, online classifieds site Preloved, junk shops and auctions. If you want to buy new on a budget, consider a multi-headed tool system: choose a handle and add different head attachments for



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each job. Try Wolf Garten's multi-change system, Wilkinson Sword's Space Saver or Gardena's Combi System. If you garden with a partner, you could buy two different handle lengths so you can both work comfortably; plus there's less to carry to the allotment if you don't have onsite storage.

Safety and security

Bear in mind where your tools will be stored and how secure they will be. If you leave your kit in your allotment shed, it's advisable to steer clear of expensive tools that could be a target for thieves, or take the valuable ones home with you. And if you're the kind of person who is always leaving tools stuck in the ground (yes, I am guilty as charged), buy ones with brightly coloured handles – Wolf Garten's are bright red, for instance, and I never lose my trusty (if pricey) red-handled Felco tools – or you can simply paint your existing wooden handles in dayglow orange!

