

# PUTTERING

## REAL TOOLS

### PRESERVE AND PROTECT

Cottage tools often sit for long periods in less-than-ideal conditions, where moisture, dirt, and debris shorten their life. Old-timers often advocate wiping tool blades with an oily rag to repel moisture. This works, but it's messy – oily tools attract dirt and oily rags need careful storage or disposal to avoid starting fires. A better option is a spray protectant, such as Bostik's TopCote (good value at \$12) or Boeshield's T-9 (about \$20, but I find it performs better). I first used it to prevent rust on cast-iron tool surfaces. It worked so well, I started coating other tools too. Shovels, rakes, hoes, axes – anything prone to rust gets a shot. Using it is easy: Just clean the tool and spray metal surfaces lightly. There are plenty of other cottage uses too – door locks, barbecue knobs, and snowmobile parts all benefit from an occasional spray. And at our cottage, where things stand idle during the winter, the water pump, outboard, and boat electrics and hardware get sprayed at closing to protect them until spring.

—Paul Lewis



**TASK MASTER** *By Paul Lewis*

## The edge of might

I wish whoever backed over my mailbox had to dig the new post-hole instead of me. I would have handed them my rented clamshell post-hole digger and settled back into my chair with a cool drink to enjoy the show. You see, the rented tool was quite dull (as I imagined the mailbox-flattener to be) and the ensuing struggle to wrest the gravelly earth from the ground with an ill-equipped implement would have been just retribution. Unfortunately, the mailbox mauler was long gone, leaving me on my own – dull digger in hand – to make a

new hole. Fortunately, putting a keen edge on the digger's blades is a simple task.

I'll resist saying that a sharp tool will make digging a joy, but it can mean the difference between a miserable job and a bearable one. Yet many people avoid sharpening anything for fear of ruining the edge. This is probably a valid worry with fine-edged tools like chisels, plane irons, and chefs' knives, but big garden tools – shovels, hoes, clamshell diggers, trowels, and the like – are easily sharpened without fear of wrecking them, using a single, inexpensive tool, the awkwardly

named flat mill bastard file. Files come in a variety of shapes – including flat, round, and half-round – with different tooth patterns and degrees of coarseness. A mill (or single-cut) file has a single series of parallel rows of teeth, while a double-cut file has a second set at an angle to the first. I like the single-cut file for this job because, used with light pressure, it's more precise than a double-cut file. Bastard, in this case, means fairly coarse, so the file will remove material quickly. A 10" single-cut bastard file costs about \$10. Don't use a bench grinder to sharpen garden



## File this under: tool care

- Never let two files rub against each other; they'll dull quickly. If you keep them loose in a drawer or a toolbox, wrap them up individually in newspaper.
- Tiny filings and debris can gum up your files' teeth. A file card, also called a file cleaner, is a brush with short, fine wire bristles that clean between a file's teeth.

tools. They're no faster than the file, and if the blade heats up too much while grinding, you risk weakening the steel.

Say you have a dull shovel in need of a tuneup. First, clean its blade using a wire brush to dislodge dirt and rust, then scrub it with a nylon brush and warm water with a few drops of liquid detergent in it (a dirty blade will dull your file). Dry the blade and clamp the shovel to a workbench (or picnic table, or deck railing) so that the handle is parallel to the ground and the blade edge is facing up. Metal files cut on the push stroke only. The teeth are more fragile in the other direction so don't rub the file back and forth over the edge. Instead, hold the file with two hands – one hand on the handle to provide the power, the other on the tip of the file to guide the strokes.

### Angle of attack

If your shovel is reasonably new and you can see the manufacturer's original bevel, stick to that angle and use it as a guide. If all traces of the bevel have been obliterated by neglect and/or misuse, 45° is a good place to start. Hold the file roughly 45° to the blade and start making smooth passes across the edge. The angle needn't be exact, just reasonably consistent with each stroke. As you stroke, move the file diagonally across the bevel, working from the outer edge of the shovel to the centre. Put weight on the beginning of each stroke, lifting away at the end. The goal is to create an even, shiny band of steel across the width of the blade. Once you get the hang of it, 30 or 40 strokes are all that will be needed to finish the job. Sharpen the blade

from the front side only. From time to time, run your finger carefully across the back edge of the blade and you should feel a fine, rough edge. This burr is a good indication that the blade is getting sharp. You can remove the burr with a couple of passes of a honing stone, but I prefer to let the contact with the soil take care of it.

Depending on how much you are digging and the condition of the soil, you may want to touch up the blade during the job. Rocky cottage soils or those with a lot of clay dull the blade quicker than sandy or loamy soils. When you've finished digging, clean the dirt off the shovel blade and apply a coating to protect the surface from moisture. I prefer an aerosol spray coating for ease of use, but a wipe with an oily rag or some paste wax works too. When you're coating the shovel blade give a shot to the file too—the closely spaced teeth are prone to rusting between uses if they're not protected.



## JOB JAR

### CLEAN, DRY SHEETS

One of the dangers of life by the lake is the dreaded soggy-paper phenomenon. Rain-spattered nautical charts rip at the folds and copies of licences disintegrate in the tacklebox. Such was the way of the world until a couple of outdoorsavvy cottagers I know shared a secret: Paper is made of wood, and thus can be treated that way. Literally. I needed to protect a map for a canoe trip, so I dug up a can of Thompson's Water Seal (although probably any brand of clear waterproofer or wood protector will work) and poured it in a paint roller tray. Wearing gloves and working outside to avoid the fumes, I dipped one side of the paper, then the other. I hung the sheet up with clothespins, and added a second coat when the first one dried.

The map was water-resistant and sturdy, with all my pen and marker annotations intact. And unlike lamination, this process doesn't add much bulk, the paper can still be folded, and notes can be added afterward in pencil or pen. Perfect for protecting plans for outdoor projects, closing-up instructions, and outhouse notices alike. —Liann Bobechko

ILLUSTRATION: RHONDA MULDER. PHOTO: GARY DAVIDSON

