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Everybody loves a garden. Whether it’s a fragrant herb garden, a lush perennial border, or a subtle shade garden, gardens touch the senses like nothing else. But not everybody loves what it takes to make a garden—hard work and the proper tools. Of the two, tools put us in touch with our gardens in the most intimate way, involving all the senses.

Tools also provide a direct link to our heritage that few of us think about when we reach for our favorite shovel, pruner, or rake and head out to prepare a new bed, trim a lilac bush, or gather up clippings.

When you see images and descriptions of common garden tools in old advertisements and catalogs, you find not much has changed in the last few centuries. What differs from colonial days is the value placed on those implements.

The tools of the modern gardener are mass-produced, readily available, relatively inexpensive, and, for the most part, disposable after several seasons. Not so for our ancestors. In their largely agrarian society, their livelihoods and their families’ nourishment depended on the implements they used to plant and cultivate beds and fields.

So valuable were garden tools that they enticed thieves. In 1763, for example, Adam Reed of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, accompanied his local constable to a spot where they found Mr. Reed’s stolen property “hid in the ground.” Among the purloined articles were four grubbing hoes, four shovels, and two spades.

In another case, John Jones of Southwark left personal tools in the care of one Captain Christian Grover during the Revolutionary War “at the time of the approach of the enemy” to Philadelphia. In 1778 Jones advertised in the Pennsylvania Gazette for the return of his property, promising that whoever returned his belongings would be “rewarded in proportion to their trouble or expense.” He listed among his prized possessions two spades, five garden hoes, one grubbing hoe, and two dung forks.

That tools had to be custom-
made or imported accounted for part of their value. Tools were central items of commerce throughout the colonies—local tradesmen crafted most of the tools in demand at that time.

For example, in the late 18th Century, Evan Truman, a blacksmith, and Thomas Goucher, a cutler, sold garden tools to the public from their Philadelphia locations at the Sign of the Scythe and Sickle. Goucher advertised his skill in making “all kinds of edge tools and all sorts of hoes,” while Truman’s wares included ditching shovels, grubbing hoes, weeding hoes, picks, and mattocks.

On a much smaller scale, local cottage industries also provided garden tools, as this listing from Stafford’s 1800 Philadelphia City Directory attests: “Genter, Charlotte; rake maker; above Brown on St. John’s Street.”

Tools that could not be crafted locally could be bought from overseas. Import houses offered hatchets, weeding hoes, and trowels from the same shipments that brought silk and worsted damasks, women’s gloves, and ivory combs.

One such firm in Philadelphia, Thomas, Samuel and Miers Fisher, advertised scythes and sickles, spades, shovels, and weeding hoes alongside the more exotic “Buenos Aires Spanish dry hides, superior sherry wine, almonds, and London bottled porter.”

Not to be outdone, legendary nurseryman Bernard McMahon—steward of the Lewis and Clark expedition’s plant collection, author of The American Gardener’s Calendar, and gardening mentor to Thomas Jefferson—operated a store that sold the various “spades, shovels, rakes, hoes, reels, lines, trowels, edging irons, garden shears, watering pots, pruning, budding and grafting knives so necessary for gardening.”

Some of mankind’s oldest garden tools date back thousands of years. The first woody plant intentionally pruned by man is believed to have been the grapevine in Armenia in about 6000 B.C. Chinese farmers used a bronze spade closely resembling more modern ones as early as 1100 B.C.

The Romans established the pattern for the spades and shovels we use today when they harnessed the technology of the forge to heat iron to its malleable point. In the mid-14th Century, iron smelting made it possible to create lighter, more precisely shaped tools. Then came the Industrial Revolution, bringing steel and alloys out of the fire and leading to the manufacture of tools that were lighter, finer, and far more durable.

The tools so necessary and valuable to our ancestors are the same ones we choose to prepare, cultivate, plant, and maintain our gardens. Until the 16th Century, those tools were simple, basic, and heavy, having evolved from agricultural implements used for hundreds of years.

But by the mid-17th Century, when popular interest in gardens exploded and gardeners had to be well equipped, illustrations from that period show a wide range of tools and accessories made for specific purposes—hedge shears, pruning shears, cultivating forks and trowels—almost every non-mechanical gardening tool available today.

So the next time you head to the garden shed, consider that the hedge shears or pruner you reach for has its roots in the 15th or 16th Century. Perhaps your favorite shovel was made by Ames, a company founded in 1774 that helped our ancestors dig up a continent from coast to coast.

For a gardener, it’s somehow reassuring to understand that those dinged-up, well-worn, trusted tools we’ve come to consider so commonplace—that have, through time and long contact with our hands and nature, earned their places in our garden sheds—have also earned their places in history.*

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