

# Build the Ultimate Toolbox



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The most efficient landscape companies are those that keep a close eye on what may seem like minor details. Whether you operate a large regional organization or run a smaller gardening service, knowing how to maximize productivity and efficiency while reducing safety risks, driving growth and improving customer satisfaction can be directly tied to quality. That means right down to the basic tools you use every day on the job site.

When landscapers incorporate higher quality tools into their work routines, they can minimize downtime. One of the biggest wastes of time and money is being at the job site and having a tool break or, worse, having the wrong tool for the job. Running to the nearest dealer to replace a broken shovel or running back to the truck for another tool to get the job done is a time and energy drain. This can waste time and, likely, increases costs and the potential for unhappy customers.

Landscape professionals should consider tools an investment. And when properly cared for, tools provide a higher rate of return, especially when landscapers invest in the best tools they can afford. Here are several considerations and some basic tools that every landscape professional should consider vital when they head out to every job site.



A quality, hand-friendly pruner reduces fatigue when making lots of cuts. PHOTOS: CORONA

## **Right tools for the job**

The job parameters should be top-of-mind when selecting tools. Take the time to read product labels and don't assume a tool will handle all your tasks. Tools are made for specific tasks. One example of this is trenching shovels with narrow heads ranging from 3 inches to 6 inches – these are ideal for digging narrow holes and trenches for irrigation work. Trenching shovels have specific angles – 28 degrees for more efficient digging and 35 degrees for

both cleaning and digging out trenches.

Using a tool for a task other than what it is rated for can cause damage to surrounding plants, cost you additional time and excessive body stress and fatigue. Using the right tool for the task at hand will make you more efficient and protect you from possible personal injury. While a higher initial investment in a tool may seem inconsequential, consider the cost of increased workers compensation and missed time if a crew member gets injured.



An irrigation bypass pruner has a built-in wire stripper for quick repairs on sprinkler heads.

## **Covet quality**

Consider the materials used in manufacturing a tool. Watch for descriptions like “12-gauge steel,” which is the thickest metal for a shovel. It will withstand the toughest jobs. Though a bit on the hefty side, the added weight of the all-steel shovel helps slice through roots easily, making digging jobs much easier and more efficient.

When it comes the gauge of the metal, the key to remember about the number is less is more. For instance, a 12-gauge shovel is thicker and sturdier than a 16-gauge shovel. The higher gauge means the head is more likely to flex and bend under heavy-duty working conditions. When shopping for a shovel, check the product label. If there is no blade gauge listed, it’s most likely a very light blade that can fail easily in tough applications. Also, the price is often a big hint on the quality of the blade and shovel overall.

When it comes to landscaping, the devil is in the details. Customers judge the quality of work based on how it looks after the landscaper leaves. One tool you will see on any professional lawn care truck is the rake. They help tidy up after the mowing, blowing, planting and pruning. Having the right rake makes collecting debris easier and quicker so employees can get on to the next job. A spring brace rake has tines that are forgiving around and over landscape materials, plants and hardscapes. A fixed tine rake makes collecting lawn clippings and leaves quicker by pulling along virtually all the debris in its path. Fixed tines don’t give and will get stuck on things like sprinkler heads and edging. A shrub rake has a smaller, narrow head for cleaning in between shrubs and flower beds. Each rake has its purpose, and using the correct one leaves the job site looking its best and helps you do it more efficiently.



All cutting tools need regular sharpening. It not only makes cutting easier, but a sharp blade is better for plant health.

## **Ergonomics and multifunctional tools**

Deciding how you are going to use a tool can help ensure the tool will perform the way you need it to, while having the least amount of impact on

your physical health and reducing downtime.

For instance, handles can have a big impact on a tool's performance. A shovel with a solid-core fiberglass handle will be tough and durable and withstand exposure to harsh weather conditions, while a hardwood ash handle will absorb the shock of digging, something landscapers appreciate after repeated use. This helps improve productivity because workers won't fatigue as quickly.

With pruners, look for blades and hooks on bypass pruners that are individually hand-matched, delivering precision, clean cuts and maximum cutting capacity. There are also newer bypass pruners with forged aluminum handles that have the strength of steel without the added weight, which is essential during extensive use.

There is nothing worse than being on the job site, pruning back the shrubs covering the irrigation pipes to replace a defective solenoid, and you realize you need the wire cutters to strip the wires to connect it. Carrying one tool instead of two like an irrigation bypass pruner with a built-in wire cutter can save you a trip back to the truck. Some multifunctional tools like this also have a built-in tip at the end to adjust sprinkler heads. The bottom line, having multifunctional tools can save time and money.

## **Replacement parts, maintenance and warranties**

For the professional contractor making a living with their tools, even the toughest tools can wear out with years of extended use. Buying a tool, such as a pruner with a replaceable blade, means you may pay a fraction of the cost of a new tool to replace only the part that is worn out. And, once replaced, it should perform as well as it did when you first bought it.

Properly maintaining your tools is essential to longer service life. Keeping cutting blades sharp requires very little effort, yet can have a big effect on time spent on the job. Sharp blades will not only cut better and save time, they are also better for the health of the lawn and plants by making the cleanest cuts. Even adding a sharpened edge to your digging tools, such as shovels or hoes, can help penetrate soils faster and easier.

A great warranty is also an important feature to look for when buying your tools. But, just as important, is knowing the company offering the warranty will be around to repair or replace a product should the need arise. Buy from companies that have been around and have staying power.

Having the right tools will make contractors more efficient, reduce stress and fatigue, limit lost time off and provide peace of mind that their investments will be returned over the life of their tools.

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