



Hoes and cultivators

The basic hoe like the Frank's 793356FNC has a wood handle with a solid, flat head that's useful for cultivating soil before planting, but it's not the best weeder. We looked at a few alternatives, two of which worked quite well.

The Ames Action Hoe is typical of a scuffle hoe. It cuts with both sides--that is, on the push stroke as well as the pull stroke--and works best in open areas.

In the tight quarters of an established garden, the Henningsen circlehoe earned high praise from our testers. The working end is small, but it can slice through even sizable weeds.

The Winged Weeder, a push-pull model, was difficult to control on the push stroke, especially in compacted soil. The head is hidden in the soil when working, so it's a bit risky to use near plants.

For breaking up clumps of soil or cultivating compacted soil, the Hi-Point Garden Cultivator was ineffective. It did little more than skim the surface.

Hoes typically range in price from \$5 to \$40.



BETTER ● ● ○ ● ● WORSE

26. Frank's 793356FNC

Rating: ● Frank's Nursery

27. Ames Action Hoe 18-663AH

Rating: ● 800 725-9500

28. Henningsen circlehoe

Rating: ● 800 735-4815

29. Creative Enterprises Winged Weeder

WW100SS

Rating: ○ 800 388-4539

30. Hi-Point Garden Cultivator 4198

Rating: ● Home Depot, Northeast only



OLD STANDBYS FACE OFF AGAINST NEW ERGONOMIC DESIGNS, ALL-IN-ONE GADGETS, AND HIGH-PRICED TOOLS WITH A BRITISH PEDIGREE.

There's always a new garden tool to try. Tool shapes, materials, and even sizes are constantly being reinvented and redefined. You'll find oddly shaped ergonomic tools sharing space with their classic counterparts in superstores, garden centers, hardware stores, and catalogs. Some are supposed to make the job easier for the average gardener; others are tailored to people who are tall or short or people with small or weak hands. Fiberglass and stainless steel compete with wood and carbon steel. Some catalogs offer pricey variations of traditional tools with "forged steel" or a "made in England" mystique.

To find out if these variations offer any improvement over what's probably already in your garden shed, we went on a shopping spree at local stores and catalogs, buying hoes, weeders, pruners, shovels, and hand tools that struck our fancy. We got both ordinary and not-so-ordinary tools. These included tools with ergonomic features, hefty price tags, scaled-down dimensions, or one-of-a-kind designs.

Our tests consisted of using the tools in the everyday chores that a garden requires: planting, weeding, shoveling, and pruning. Our testers worked in the gardens at our National Testing and Research Center in Yonkers, N.Y., and in their own backyards.

With most tools, the traditional designs work quite well (). Most of the unconventional designs were equally competent but not worth buying to replace serviceable tools you currently own. Some proved better than the typical tools, either because they make chores easier or because they're suited to specific tasks or users. We found some tools that were mediocre, and a couple that simply couldn't do the job they're meant to do.

While some of the tools we tested were unusual designs, most were not unique. Other models of similar design may perform in much the same way if quality is comparable. In some cases, the tools we used as quality benchmarks are unavailable; for those, we check-tested models judged comparable.

When selecting tools, look for sturdy construction--one piece or a strong connection between handle and working end--handles that fit your hand, and comfortable weight. Materials matter, too: Wood and steel, including coated steel, may not stand up to moisture, chemicals, and soil as well as aluminum, stainless steel, and plastic. But before investing in new garden tools, consider "tuning up" those you already have. A metal file can improve a shovel's edge. Hardware stores may offer sharpening of tools like pruners. Worn wooden handles benefit from an occasional rubdown with boiled linseed oil.