

✿ The Working Garden

A tool shed can be a gardener's retreat

Before we moved to our house in Rye, New York, I kept my gardening equipment in our garage. Most tools were tucked in a corner, fighting for space with our kids' bicycles, snow sleds, and toys. Often tools got buried or misplaced. I was excited that our new home had a small structure attached to the rear of the garage. I planned to make it my home away from home.

Originally, my tool shed measured 8 by 10 feet, with a dirt floor. Its flat-pitched roof was so low that anyone but a child had to stoop to enter. It was dark, except for light that penetrated the room when the door was open, and it had a damp, musty smell.

I leaned long-handled tools against one wall and piled hand tools on top of several old wooden milk crates. I soon discovered that fertilizer absorbed the moisture that was ever-present with a dirt floor and gave off an offensive smell of ammonia. And I got tired of stooping and occasionally bumping my head on the low ceiling.

So I decided to upgrade my rundown shed into a usable structure. First, I ripped off the flat roof, raised the walls, and installed a pitched roof. Then I replaced the solid door with a French door that I purchased from a wrecking company. I cut an opening in the front wall for a window, which I had saved when we replaced the windows in our house. I poured a concrete floor and wrote our sons' names in the corner, along with the date. An electrician installed a light, several electrical outlets, and two telephone lines—one for a phone and one for a modem. I was thinking big.

I painted the interior walls and ceiling a light mint-green and the floor an Ear-

ly American blue-gray. I furnished it with an old kitchen table with chrome legs and a red metal top and two matching chairs. I lined one wall with heavy-duty, zinc-plated-steel double hooks for the long-handled tools. I placed an old bookshelf along the rear wall to hold hand tools, gloves, clay pots, books, and whetstones.

The tool shed is finished, for now. I often go there early in the morning with a cup of freshly brewed coffee and the newspaper. Benny "Fat Cat" Cohan joins me and spreads his furry feline figure gracefully across the paper on top of the table. It's a delicate dance—Benny desiring total attention and me attempting to read the news around his well-fed physique. I just don't have the heart to push him off the table, so I've resigned myself to enjoying half-read news stories as I stroke him into purring heaven.

Some days, I spend hours in the shed simply puttering about. I relish clean-

ing the hand-forged, solid-stainless-steel Wilkinson Sword half-moon edger, or sharpening my Felco Number 2 pruners. I have whetstones of various shapes, which I use to get a good edge on different tools. One oblong stone tapers to a rounded point at both ends, which is great for getting into the narrow end of a lopper's crotch. I use a typical rectangular whetstone, which has both rough and smooth sides, to sharpen shovels and spades. First, I start with the rough side to smooth out the end of the shovel or spade and follow with the smooth side to bring the tool edge to a sharp finish. Once done, I generally run an oiled cloth over the metal to reduce rusting and to retain a sharp edge. Benny, doing his part, lies lazily atop the bookshelf along the cool northern concrete-block wall, with his eyes half shut. He stares at me with a look of dignified indifference.

Lately, I've begun collecting antique and interesting garden tools. I've acquired an old, wooden-handled lawn mower with one wheel. No, it's not a joke. This early mechanical lawn edger was used to trim grass before ear-piercing, gas-powered weed whackers were foisted upon the halcyon green spaces of suburbia. I use it along the edges of our garden beds. I love the quiet whirring sound the blades make while cutting the grass.

On fall afternoons, as the sun casts its warm golden rays through the surrounding trees and shrubs, I sit in the shed with Benny curled in my lap. In silence, we watch the brightly colored maple leaves as they fall. I sit back, smiling at a season's work well done and admiring the sharpened and oiled tools hanging in place. Oh yes, and I scratch Benny behind his ears to thank him for all his help.

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