

Tools of the Trade

Bozeman artist Tuli Fisher creates art for work

In the
studio

BY MICHELE CORRIEL

THROUGH THE KITCHEN AND OUT THE BACK DOOR, Tuli Fisher leads the way to his studio/shed. It's small and crowded with tools, crates and two wooden boats hanging from the rear wall — a canoe and a kayak — but there's plenty of elbow room. His propane blacksmithing forge sits at eye-level. His London pattern anvil is stationed just below.

Tuli Fisher's hand-forged garden tools call to mind the best of utilitarian art. Every inch of the instruments is thought through and holds the mark of their maker. His hand-turned hickory handles beg to be touched, as the hammered edges of the spades and trowels like divining rods seem drawn to the ground. Yes, they are tools, but they're so much more than that.

"I rivet everything; I don't weld," Fisher says, reaching for a pair of long-handled tongs. "There's plenty of modern methods out there for joining materi-



artist portrait by Thomas Lee

als but I like the traditional ones. Basically, I drill, pin and rivet my tools together. These were the methods used before there was electricity."

Fisher fires up the forge. Heat builds in seconds and soon there's a soft, rumbling roar tumbling from the toaster-oven like device. The heat is working its way up to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

"The materials I work with lend themselves especially well to the rugged use that garden tools are put through," he says. "The designs are simply traditional ones I found to be the most useful."

The anvil consists of three parts: the face, which is the flat part on top, the horn, which is used for bending and curving, and the "hardie

hole," which is a square hole in the anvil that holds various tools like a swage (for convex shapes) and a fuller (for concave shapes).

He pulls out a vividly hot-orange piece of steel from the forge. Laying the rectangular eight-inch metal stick on the face of his anvil, Fisher hammers one end for less than minute to flatten it. Each strike of the hammer sends flickers of sparks arcing to the ground. By the time the embers fall, they've cooled to black.

Fisher makes about five or six different tools: a hand rake, a trowel, two kinds of spades, a hand-hoe and a new design for digging up dandelions. By keeping the variety small, he can concentrate his



work on the tools he knows work well.

"I'm on a schedule now to make twice as many tools as I made last year," Fisher says of his growing business. He sells his tools at Bogert's Farmers' Market as well as traveling part of the year to flower and garden shows all over the West. "I don't like to wholesale them because I know how much I need for each tool and I don't want them to sell for more than 30 or 40 dollars apiece."

A few years ago a major seed catalog out of Oregon, Victory Seeds, began to carry his line in their mail-order catalog.

"We started carrying Tuli's tool line in 2005," Mike Dunton of Victory Seeds says. "Tuli's garden

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our line has filled that niche very well. We wanted to offer our customers a higher end, handmade product that was an alternative to the cheap, disposable-grade garbage from China that has permeated the market. Additionally, I am a person that likes to support alternatives to the corporate world. If I can buy from a craftsman like Tuli for a little higher cost, I'll choose that over a cheap import any day."

Victory Seed Company is a small, family-operated organization that works to keep old heirloom and open-pollinated seed varieties available to home gardeners. Fisher's tools fit right in with the Victory Seed Company, and Dunton appreciates the artistry in them.

"His pieces are sturdy, beautiful, functional but like small sculptures," Dunton says. "Because of the cost, the market is limited to a certain class of gardeners, but they are certainly worth the price."

On the floor of the shed lay a pile of long-handled hickory sticks waiting for a forged iron tool to be riveted to them.

"That's a tool I've just developed and I've only made about a hundred of them," Fisher says, pulling a 54-inch handle with a flattened fork-like blade on the end. He holds it vertically and steps on the bent forked iron bottom. "It's for digging up dandelions."

He smiles. He knows this is brilliant. No more bending over and inching your way across a yellow-stained yard.

"I want to wait until I get a good bit of feedback," he says, grabbing another rod from the forge. "So far it's been good."

He holds the glowing steel with the tongs while hammering the metal over the horn to curve the end for the tines of a hand rake. He moves the metal with the tongs while hammering at the same spot, curving the supple steel, pulling with one hand and hammering with the other.

"I want a nice, gradual radius, so it needs to be hot enough to be malleable," he says, returning the metal to the fire-hot forge. In that short of an amount of time, the color dulls from a neon orange to a gray-raspberry. "Even when it's not glowing anymore, it's still about 900 degrees, and you can still shape it, it just won't be as easy. With this type of work it's best for the steel to be as hot as I can get it."

Usually, he works in batches, not finishing up a complete tool one at a time but instead making a pile of tines, then drilling and riveting them together. He figures if he completes one tool at a time, he could probably make about three a day. Instead, by doing it in batches, he can usually turn out about a hundred in a week. For a one-man operation, it pays to be streamlined.

Once he has enough tines for the rake, he'll drill small holes in the steel and place rivets through them. Then the piece goes back in the forge.

"I like to set the rivets hot with a ball peen hammer," he says, picking up a pencil and a clipboard to draw a picture of the process. "The round end of the hammer mushrooms the end of the rivet."

Fisher started out blacksmithing and shoeing horses. He still has a farrier business, but spends most of his time on the garden tools, which have really taken off.

When Fisher was first starting to play with the idea of making the tools, he gave a set to Susan Thomas of Montana Farrier Supply in Livingston.

"He gave me the rake and a spade, which I use a lot; I'm not even an avid gardener," she says. "They're nicely made, the handles are really good and they're very durable. It's a shame to get them dirty, but I definitely did."

Because Fisher started out blacksmithing, and the first lesson a blacksmith learns is to make his or her own set of tools for the forge, it seemed natural for him to make some other types of tools when things slowed down one winter.

"Tuli was helping the guy who used to own the supply store and began to make some tools in the forge," Thomas says. "And things just kind of took off from there."



In the beginning, when Fisher gave Thomas her tools, he often asked her how they worked if she thought there were ways to make them better.

"I'm not sure about his quest for the perfect tool, but he did ask for feedback on the tools he gave me," Thomas says. "I think he just realized there were all these shoddy tools on the market and he thought he could build a better rake, or a better handle, rather than the cheap stuff made in China. He asked a bunch of questions about the tools he gave me and he did that with a lot of people who used his tools."

Fisher says his tools are always evolving, and he digs out an older model of the trowel design he's using now. It has different kinds of rivets, and the handle is not shaped the way his handles are now shaped — more graspable.

"I'm always learning," he says. "Every year they look a little different from the year before. I listen to people when they talk about the types of tools they need or use a lot and what they're favorite tools are."

Fisher's noticed that there's been a big increase in the number of garden tools that are available on the market, but he also noted that not all of them work.

"A lot of those are created for the sake of offering a variety," he says. "I want to avoid making things that don't work, so I'm very picky about the garden tools I make."

Next up, he'd like to work on some more of the long-handled tools. We'll just have to wait and see what turns up at the Farmer's Market. @

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