

Forging a Connection

How a skilled blacksmith uses his love for his craft and his garden to create artistic and functional gardening tools



WHEN IT COMES to beautiful and handcrafted designs, Tuli Fisher of Bozeman, Mont., has mastered the technique. With strong, hand-forged steel skillfully set into stunning, rich walnut handles, his garden tools would fit as well in an art museum as they do in the tool shed.

Fisher's career as a blacksmith began in his 20s, when he started using his own tools for a horseshoeing business. He has created tools for more than

15 years now, but it wasn't until 2003 that he began to dabble in gardening tools, inspired by an encounter with a farmer in Cottage Grove, Ore., where he and his wife were living while she attended graduate school. "I guess with all the hammering it was no secret I was a blacksmith," recounts Fisher. "I fixed his tool for him, but realized I could make an even better one."

After successfully repairing the farmer's tools, Fisher dis-

covered that many local growers wanted something not only functional and lasting, but also handcrafted right here in the United States. "My garden tools are made of domestically sourced materials, something that can be hard to find these days," says Fisher. "Starting with high-quality materials is the beginning for creating a high-quality tool."

Materials and elements such as hardwood, steel, fire, water and air are how Fisher hand-

makes his functional creations. "The forging process, in its basic form, is heating up the material using fire," he explains. "Whether that's gas or coal, you need to add air to it in order to make the fire burn hotter. That in turn heats up the steel, and when you have the steel shaped or formed the way you want it, you clinch it in water."

With the growing demand for Fisher's gardening tools, he has started using electricity and some power tools in place of making all of his own rivets and punching holes with a hammer and anvil; this allows for fabrication in a much more reasonable timeframe. Previously, one tool took three days to make!

Though the labor can be extensive, Fisher thoroughly enjoys the life of a blacksmith, saying making garden tools is the perfect combination of his love of blacksmithing and gardening. After creating a set of gardening tools, he tests their durability and functionality in his own garden, full of vegetables, apple and cherry trees and a flowerbed teeming with tulips, a process he likes to call "field testing." This allows him to experience firsthand how the tools feel.

Through trial and error Fisher's tools have grown in complexity and functionality. "The tools that I made originally where a lot larger and somewhat awkward to use," he recalls. "It's only been through making changes every time that I make a batch of gardening tools that I have kind of refined my designs and got them to look the way they do now."

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rent line, Fisher feels there is always room for improvement and expansion. He has started using reused and recycled materials and he plans to create more variety in his garden tools so his customers will have more choices.

While his selection in product may be limited compared to mass-produced gardening tools, Fisher is confident that his artistry offers more to gardeners. His abilities as a blacksmith

mixed with his own experience as a gardener creates the perfect balance, sparking a personal connection between the gardener and Fisher's tools.

"The time and the effort I put into my garden tools are really

The products of blacksmith Tuli Fisher are as much art pieces as they are fully functional garden tools.





kind of an effort to communicate to the people that are using them," says Fisher. "This is something that can be as special as you want to make it. I think that there is nothing better than growing your own really special heirloom tomatoes with a nice hand-forged trowel." ☞

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