

The cold and cloudy days of winter are here again and even the most stalwart among us can get depressed at the thought of having to endure yet another day where the highs in temperature don't exceed the ages of our teenage children. Take heart! Be of good cheer! Spring is just around the corner. Meanwhile, on those warm and sunny days, might I suggest we all spend time getting our tools and equipment in order to better perform the chores we know are headed our way.

First on my list will be the annual maintenance of the small engines we use to keep our places looking their best. Walk behind mowers, riding mowers, gas-powered leaf blowers, chipper/shredders, pole saws, chainsaws, tillers, and weed whackers all require periodic maintenance to operate their best. The chief enemy of all small, air cooled engines is dirt. Layers of built up soil, oil, and grease unnecessarily increase the internal heat of the engines and shortens the life of the machine. Once your equipment is cleaned, give a thought to tightening all the screws, bolts, and nuts. With that chore done, it's time to change the oil (and for larger engines – the oil filter). Some might argue with me on a choice or type of oil; but, for more years than I care to admit I have used any brand of SAE 30 weight – up to you. Before leaping ahead to the main event, check out the air filter and either clean or replace it. Most gardening equipment has a cutting edge and by keeping the edges sharp you will lessen the effort required to complete whatever task you have decided to do. For all mowing machines, it is customary to sharpen the blades two to three times (or more) during the cutting season. Some of our machines have drive belts and they too need our attention. If they are extremely worn and/or cracked, go ahead and replace them. You know they are going to break! Might as well install new belts before they break right in the middle of a last minute dash to catch up on the mowing. Yes, I need to follow my own advice on this particular subject – I'm not the only one am I who failed to take a few minutes during winter to install a new belt only to have to stop mid-operation to perform this time consuming maintenance. We are not all perfect!

What about your hand pruners? When was the last time you sanded and sharpened the blades? Recall last fall when you were snipping or dead heading stems. Was the cut you made quick and clean or did you have to shred and tear apart the vegetation? If it was the latter, your pruners need to be sharpened. How about the hoe and shovel that was placed in a corner after its last use to be forgotten until needed again? Yep – they probably need some help too. Keeping your shovel sharp makes digging in our Missouri clay, not a cheerful experience; but, a whole lot easier. Keeping the wooden handles of all our tools sanded and coated with 10W40 prevents having to go to the medicine chest for tweezers and mercurochrome required for splinter removal. And, if you want to prevent dry rot of wooden handles, thoroughly soaking the handles in boiled linseed oil will extend the life of the tool.

Well, these activities should keep us occupied for the time being. I'll leave you with a quote from my Granddad, "It's easier to take care of something than it is to buy it again." That made sense when first heard and it makes sense now. Questions/comments? You know the drill. Write: 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email: mandpak@embarqmail.com and I'll get right back with you. Meanwhile, throw another stick in the fire; it's cold out there!