

## DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

# Yes, you can can

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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Nearly half a century ago, my partner and I started a landscape business. Our overhead costs were nominal: gas to drive to the site and four tools—a rake, sharp clippers, a weeder, and a shovel. I zealously protected those tools.

**Our ancestors' tools were also zealously protected,** not only by each family as a means of survival, but also by thieves. Garden tools were as necessary as guns for survival.

According to Sandy Levins, author of "The Use, Value, and Theft of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Garden Tools," there are strong connections between our tools of today and the tools of our predecessors. Levins writes, "When you look into the history of some of the most common garden tools we use today and study their images and descriptions from advertisements and old catalogs, you find that not much has changed, with the exception of material, in hundreds of years" (<http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews69.shtml>). Gardening is just one of the links to our agrarian roots, and the tools we use—unless you are digging with your fingers—are the historical links.

**Some of the oldest garden tools are said to date back to 6000 BCE.** There are archeological indications that the Chinese were using bronze tools resembling our spades of today as early as 1100 BCE. As Levins goes on to explain, "The Romans established the pattern for the spades and shovels we use today when they harnessed the technology of the forge to heat iron to its malleable point. In the mid-14th century, iron smelting made it possible to create lighter, more

precisely-shaped tools. Then came the industrial revolution, bringing steel and alloys out of the fire and leading to the manufacture of tools that were lighter, finer and far more durable."

Ah, and here we are today in the techno age using garden tools that resemble those of yore but are now mass-produced, break easily, and are not handed down as a family's heirloom tools of necessity. Garden tools per se are no longer made with pride, nor hand-forged by the local blacksmith.

**One of my garden tools of which I am still proud** is my collection of vintage watering cans. (It was in 1692 that Lord Timothy George wrote the term "watering can," previously referred to as "watering pot," in his garden diary. Thus the term "watering can" was created.)

**Watering cans** come in many different styles. Some have several holes

and some have just a single opening. Over time, the spout has moved around from the side to the bottom and back to facilitate drainage.

Watering cans, interestingly enough, are often identified by their country of origin. I don't know if this was always so, but "vintagely" speaking, the shape, handle and spout are the give-away parts. French watering cans tend to have graceful handles arching from the top of the can to the back. English-style watering cans usually have two handles, one for carrying and another for pouring.

While attempting to identify the differences between French, English and German watering cans, I often noted overlaps in design or that watering cans were identified as "French or English."

**Today, I have two garden tools of necessity:** my Japanese weeder and a very sharp handheld clipper. The watering can is not really a necessity,

as an old bucket or any vessel will work. However, my treasured collection of watering cans is both functional and part of my garden-art history. So instead of practical tools, it is my watering cans that I zealously protect the most—oh silly, romantic me.

**So why the romance of a watering can?** How about focusing on versatility. A watering can could be converted to a centerpiece filled with flowers or live plants. I have often filled clean, new watering cans with long sticks of black and red licorice, luxurious lengths of cinnamon sticks, or any beverage of choice, surprising guests with a unique pouring vessel.

Whatever you think you can or cannot do in your garden, you *can* do anything with your can.

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Photo, left: Vintage French watering can ([maisonclaire.co.uk/product-category/garden/](http://maisonclaire.co.uk/product-category/garden/)). Photo, right: Vintage German watering can ([etsy.com](http://etsy.com)).



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