

Uses of a Shovel

Consider the list of basic tools that have served mankind throughout history: (the ones we take for granted, or return to in an emergency to sustain our lives) the knife, axe, rope, blanket, tent, table, shoe, needle, awl, hat, backpack, money, writing tablet, bowl, bottle, basket, bag, cooking pot, compass, fishhook, wheeled cart, fire-making implements, etc. To this list belongs that marvelous tool, **the shovel**. It is found among the oldest artifacts of man, and yet is also found in the hands of millions of laborers today. Neither its form nor basic uses have changed much in all the millennia of human civilization and technological advance. The modern shovel is superior to its antecedents simply by virtue of its better steel and economical mass production. Though often overlooked by modern collectors of gadgetry, it remains a fundamental personal possession, simple in its strength, lifesaving in its capability. Those skilled in its use are admired as they work, both for their feats of accomplishment and technique, and for the sculpting of their bodies which the exercise provides.

Good form in shoveling, as in lifting, dancing, or martial arts, is to move from the hips, do most of the work with your legs, not your back, and maintain good posture. This avoids fatigue and injury. A skilled workman respects what a shovel can and cannot do, cares for his tools, and rarely breaks one.

Shovels are not all alike. Pick a good one. It should be full sized but not heavier than necessary. Moderately curved blades are better than strongly curved ones, thicker steel better than thin, and not too much angle between the handle and the blade. Stay away from fiberglass, rubberized handles, gimmicks, and thin soft-iron oriental products. Hickory or similar hardwood handles remain the best, and it is essential that the grain of the handle be perpendicular to the plane of the blade, else it will break. It should have a comfortable, balanced feel to it. After choosing the style, always pick the straightest, strongest-looking handle in the bunch. The cost of a good shovel is insignificant compared to its value, and is not a reliable indicator of functionality, so do not look at price. It is no more extravagant to have several shovels than to have several pair of shoes. The following categories of shovel usage are merely suggestive:

Normal Uses

Extracting a stuck vehicle from mud, sand, or snow. Spreading gravel on an icy road.
Lifting a spare tire onto lug bolts, when adequate brute force is not available. Clearing away cactus.
Digging a footing. Leveling a yard. Uncovering water or sewer lines for remedy, or digging new ones.
Marking, tilling, furrowing, weeding, or irrigating a garden. Removing weeds and shrubs too big to hoe.
Planting trees. Tamping dirt around a new post. Opening a gopher hole to set a trap.
Mixing cement or mortar in a wheel barrow. Reaching a peach or an apple on a high branch.
Killing a rattlesnake. (Smack it hard in the middle with the flat of the blade. This will momentarily stun the snake so he can't dodge. Then quickly turn the blade over and chop his head off. Bury the head, which remains dangerous to pets and children.)
Killing packrats. (Dig them out, then same technique as snake.)

Camping

Clearing a spot for a tent or picnic blanket. 'Ditching' a tent. As a walking stick. Leveling camp table legs.
Prying up stubborn tent pegs. Burying large rocks to serve as tent anchors, (instead of tent pegs, which don't work well in sand.) Clearing a site for campfire, dig a fire pit, put out embers ejected from campfire.
Managing a cooking fire, distributing coals on and around a Dutch oven.
Harvesting squaw wood (dead lower limbs) for the campfire, and chopping it up into kindling.

Potential Emergency Uses

Cutting ramps in a stream bank to make passable a washed-out road. As an oar. Well padded, a crutch.
Digging a garbage pit, fire pit, well, solar still, expedient fallout shelter, snow cave, grave, or latrine.
Cleaning up fiberglass insulation, broken glass, contaminants and spilled garbage. As a leg splint.
Digging for grubs and tubers to eat. Personal defense against man or beast. Herding fish into a net.
An improvised tent pole or ridgepole. Putting out grass fires. To reach a floundering swimmer.
Breaking out a window in house or car, to rescue or escape. Enlarge a spring or seep to fill water containers.
In an emergency a shovel could break through most light-weight doors and walls. Probing for hazards.
Noise maker: bang on a rock to frighten an animal or signal for help. A flagpole. Air rescue marker maker.
Clean up after a flood, or make a levee to mitigate one. Source of steel for flint-and-steel fire-making.
Lifting a live power line off an electrocution victim. A probe and steadying pole for crossing swift streams.
Opening a barrel cactus to access its moisture.