

You can handle it

As a self-sufficient smallholder, why not make your own tool handles? Martin Beat shows you how

MODERN METHODS

I sometimes shape smaller tool handles from a split ash plank, using power tools such as a jigsaw plus an angle grinder with a flap disc, which can be quicker than using hand tools. The important thing is that you produce a handle rather than buy one, so choose your own methods of shaping.

- 1 Draw around your template tool handle onto the blank.
- 2 Use the jigsaw to cut out the shape
- 3 Use the flap disc on the angle grinder to finish the shaping process
- 4 After drying the handle out, use a drill sanding attachment to gently shape the top of the handle until it is a snug fit



As is the case with many crafts, making tool handles is a time consuming activity. This process is deep in our DNA from when early man handled the first tools, so expect a deep sense of satisfaction with your handle!

Choose your log carefully. Ash is the best local wood for tool handles, because it is unparalleled in its ability to withstand shocks which would snap other woods. It is important to find a log as long as the handle will be, and over twice the largest diameter of the eye of the tool handle. The log should also have 'straight grain' or the absence of side branches and knots, which would be points of weakness in your handle. If the natural shape of the log matches the desired shape for the handle then so much the better. If the grain of the wood is intact, flowing in the shape of the handle, then the handle will be stronger than if the shape is imposed irrespective of the grain of the wood.



1, 2 & 3. You may have to drill out an old handle end from the eye of the tool head. In this case I am using a 10mm twist drill bit, taking out all the wood around the metal wedge sunk into the middle of the handle of this sledge hammer.

I recommend cleaving wood as described here, rather than using a round log to furnish a handle, because it removes the soft pithy centre of the round wood which would otherwise cause weakness in the handle. Also roundwood handles are more likely to split during the drying process unless special care is taken. The handle must be dry before the tool head is fitted, otherwise it will shrink loose as it dries.

When working wood initially into shape you will find that fresher green wood is softer and easier to work because of its high moisture content. Because the handle will be dried out before fitting into the tool head, be careful to leave the top of the handle oversize when you initially shape it to allow for natural shrinkage during the drying process.

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4. Cleave a log into at least two 'blanks', initiating the split at one end of the log with an axe, then following the split along its length with splitting wedges.

5. If the log is over four times the diameter of the eye of the tool head, use a froe and makeshift cleaving brake (if you have them) to cleave both halves into equal quarters. You can also use axe and wedges to achieve the same result.

6. At this point, measure and mark the shape of the handle onto the blank. Use another tool handle as a template if you wish, but make sure to mark the end of the handle which will go into the eye of the tool head at least a centimetre oversize to allow for shrinkage during the drying process. Now use an axe to start the rounding process, taking off the corners of the blank with a series of angled cuts followed by a downward stroke to remove the chips.

7. Use a clamping device, in this case a shave horse, to hold the blank while shaving the handle smoother with a drawknife. I am leaving a swell at the bottom end of the handle, otherwise the handle is straight and round.

8. Draw around the inside of the eye of the tool head onto the top end of the tool handle.

9. You can shape to within a centimetre of this line, but no more!

10. Dry the handle out for a few weeks in a gently warm environment, such as an airing cupboard or by the kitchen range, until the handle is dryer than it will be in the tool shed - in this case 13 percent moisture content.

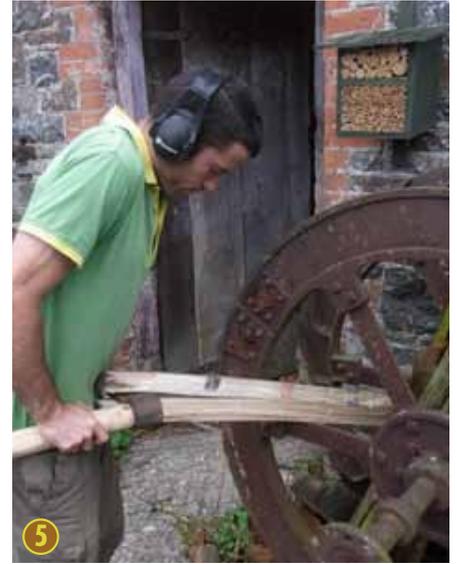
11. If the log has been cut and stored for any length of time, cut a centimetre or so off the top end of the handle to remove over-dry or cracked wood. Remark the size of the eye on the handle end as before. Also mark the depth of the tool head onto the handle.

12. Use a spokeshave or similar to shape the top end of the handle exactly to the lines you have marked.

13. Now alternate between tapping the tool head onto the handle, and removing very small amounts of material with a spoke shave, rasp, file or sandpaper. The high spots of the handle end will be marked black by the contact with the eye of the tool head, and it is this material you remove to obtain a snug fit. In addition, try to make an accurate convex shape where the bottom of the head will sit onto the handle. This is an important stage and will require a little patience, so please don't rush it!

14. When the handle fits, protruding a centimeter or so out the top of the tool head, remove the head and make a saw cut parallel to the main axis of the tool head. The cut should be two thirds the depth of the tool head.

15. Tap the tool head back on.





16. Make a wedge from dry oak heartwood. Use whichever tools you have to split a thin section of oak, then create a wedge shape as wide as the longest diameter of the tool head eye, as deep as the tool head, and a thickness of about one centimeter tapering to the sharp end of the wedge. Chamfer all the edges and corners.

17. With the bottom of the handle on the ground tap the wedge into the saw cut using a protective piece of wood between wedge and hammer as shown.

18 & 19. When the wedge is firmly home trim back the excess wood protruding from the top of the tool head. If you wish, you can now tap a metal wedge in perpendicular to the wooden wedge to make the handle a really tight fit.

20. Apply a coating of linseed oil or similar, then enjoy using a handcrafted item rather than a mass produced product

