



Reaching for the Right Fork

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Reach for the wrong fork at a dinner party, and the worst that might befall you is a snooty glance. The wrong fork in the garden, on the other hand, makes for less-efficient work.

A garden fork might bring to mind the pitchfork held by the dour farmer in the painting *American Gothic*.? But that tool, though emblematic of farm life, has a special use: pitching loose hay onto a haystack or wagon, not something you do every day. Home gardeners rely on the spading fork, which I consider indispensable.

A spading fork's four tines are much heavier than those of a pitchfork. If well-made, it's a rugged tool, built to do battle with soil ? and the rocks it contains ? without bending. It pierces the ground more easily than would a shovel or a spade and is great for pre-loosening soil that you can then lift out with a shovel, and for breaking up heavy soil clumps so that amendments can be added. The stubborn, matted roots of meadow grasses yield to it and can then be yanked intact. Dandelions are pulled out unbroken if a spading fork has probed around them. The digging fork, a similar tool with flattened tines, is the best one for prying out root crops such as carrots.

A manure fork resembles a spading fork, but its tines are thinner and curved for scooping. It may have as few as three tines or as many as 12. Though it's meant for cleaning out stalls and other farm chores, gardeners value it for lifting compost materials when they're turning a heap, or for shifting mulch from pile to wheelbarrow to garden bed. More rugged than a pitchfork, it is nevertheless a lifting-and-pitching tool. Confusingly, the name is often used interchangeably with bedding fork, ensilage fork, scoop fork, stall fork and compost fork.

Best to shop for this tool with the task in mind: Hay mulch, or compost materials that have not decomposed much, can be moved with a few tines, widely spaced. More-crumbly compost, and mulches such as shredded bark and wood chips, require the type with many tines, spaced close together, so the material does not fall through. (The manure fork was designed to scoop lumps of solid manure from even finer material such as wood shavings, letting that bedding fall back into the stall.)

The broadfork is a large, heavy tool made to cultivate and aerate soil in place. Its heft is a good thing, because gravity does most of the work. Holding its two handles upright, you press down on the crossbar with your foot, allowing the long tines to sink into the ground. Pulling the handles toward you causes the tines to lift and loosen the soil and open up air channels, a movement so effective that it can replace tilling. And you won't even work up a sweat.

You can do the same thing with your trusty spading fork, which is also a good soil aerator. But it will take many times longer to do it, and if your garden is large, a broadfork might well be the right one to reach for.

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