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Save Your Tools

More than gadgets, your tools are an everyday extension of your hands. Taking care of them gives you stronger instruments, more money and happier customers.

By Matt Alderton


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Robert Maiolo is a self-confessed tool abuser. The owner of San Francisco-based Friendly Plumber, he's been a plumber for more than 25 years, during which time he's purchased—and replaced—dozens, if not hundreds, of hand tools. In the past six months, alone, he's had to buy eight six-in-one screwdrivers.

"I'm horrible with tools," Maiolo admits. Still, he appreciates that with a little bit of love, his tools easily could outlive him.

"These things last forever," says Tom Reardon, owner of Monroe, N.Y.-based Master Plumber USA and operator of [www.masterplumber.net](#), his plumbing resource site for do-it-yourself homeowners. "You should take care of them."

All too often, Reardon says, plumbers lose or misplace their favorite tools. Just as often, though, they toss them into the bottom of a wet bucket, where they rust and corrode themselves toward an inevitable end.

Your tools may age, but they don't have to expire. A little maintenance will keep them healthier and stronger for longer, meaning a cost-savings for you.

Maintenance Pays

For customer-conscious professionals, tool maintenance should be a requirement, says Dave Hannan, franchise systems manager at the Mr. Rooter corporate headquarters in Waco, Texas. "Every customer expects a clean, courteous craftsman in their home," he says.

In other words, if you're going into a customer's home, your tools ought to work well, look clean and smell nice. "It's all about what your customers see," Hannan says.

Of course, it's also about what they pay, and maintaining your old tools, rather than always buying new ones, keeps your costs down and your prices lower. "It's appearance and it's customer service, but it's also going to save a plumber money," Hannan says. "The money savings over time can be tremendous."

Buy Better, Not Cheaper

The typical plumber's toolbox includes an army of basic hand tools, including a [hammer](#), some [screwdrivers](#) and a [tape measure](#); specialized plumbers' tools, such as [pipe wrenches](#), pipe [cutters](#), [soldering equipment](#) and slip-joint pliers; and power tools, [drills](#), for example, a cable machine and a water jetter.

With each of these tools, Maiolo suggests, maintenance starts at the hardware store, where he recommends buying the highest-quality tools you can afford. "The only time you can get a quality tool to last is if it's extremely well produced," he says.

Avoid homeowners' tools and look instead for professional-grade tools with a solid warranty and a certain amount of heft. "Heavy, well-made products hold up better than lighter-grade tools," Maiolo says.

"The biggest mistake is believing that tools are designed to be replaced on a regular basis," Hannan adds.

Keep Things Clean

If you want your tools to last, you've got to clean them. "Maintenance is literally just oiling your tools down once every couple of months," he states. "That right there will save so many tools that have been rusted sitting in the bottom of a bucket."

Ideally, though, you'll keep your tools out of wet buckets entirely. "Always keep them clean and dry," Reardon says. "Never put a plumbing tool away wet. You have to dry it off and give it a little squirt of [WD-40](#). That's preventive maintenance."

If WD-40 isn't doing the trick, consider these alternative cleaning tips:

- *Diminish debris.* Plumbing tools are notorious for getting gunked up. Keep your wrenches dirt-free by wiping them down after every use. "Take a little wire brush to those teeth," Reardon says. "That will give your wrenches a better bite."
- *Lubricate after every use.* Once you've wiped off any dirt or grease, take an oiled rag to your tools. Out of WD-40? "Transmission fluid is an inexpensive alternative," Hannan says.
- *Scrub them with sand.* In order to be saved, some tools require some serious scrubbing power. Fill a bucket with sand, Hannan suggests, then saturate the sand with vegetable oil until it's moist. Bury your filthiest tools in the sand overnight, and then scrub them with steel wool to remove rust stains and sludge.
- *Buy replacement parts.* Some tools just can't be saved. That doesn't mean they need to be tossed entirely, though. You can buy new blades and rollers for your cutters, replacement teeth for your pipe wrenches and new heads for your six-in-one screwdrivers.

Stay Organized

Cleaning isn't enough when your idea of storage is a soggy bucket or the inside of a dirty truck. To keep your tools in good working order, put them away when you're done using them.

"Keeping an inventory system is essential," Hannan says. "Tools have got to go back where they belong."

You don't need anything fancy, but a simple [toolbox](#), [tool chest](#) or bucket organizer will go a long way toward keeping your hand tools clean, your plumbers' tools strong and your power tools powerful.

"It's common sense," Hannan says. "Just keep them clean, wipe them down and put them away. That's the best way to take care of your tools."

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