

GARDENING

For the love of gloves

Louisville firm gets a 'thumbs up' for its innovative designs

By **DIANE HEILENMAN**

dheilenman@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

How many pairs of gloves does a gardener need?

In an ideal world? One.

It not being an ideal world, I happen to own at least a dozen pairs of largely unsatisfactory gardening gloves. I recently tried still one more pair and, I'm thinking, the ideal world may have arrived.



It is here courtesy of, oddly enough, a sports-equipment designer in Louisville. The makers of the world-famous Louisville Slugger baseball bat, Hillerich & Bradsby Co., are launching a new era in gardening gloves with a distinctive-looking and incredibly functional pair of dark brown and beige sheepskin and neoprene gloves.

The gloves, which sell for \$39, will be available beginning today at the gift shop at the Louisville Slugger Museum, 800 W. Main St., and through Internet sales at www.louisvillesluggergifts.com, where the \$47 price includes shipping and handling.

The gloves, which are part of the evolving Bionic Technology Division of H&B, offer design and technology that is, to my knowledge, revolutionary in gardening. H&B apparently thinks so, too, because they hold four patents on the gloves and have four more pending.

I have been disappointed more rather than less with almost every other gardening-type glove from knit cotton-string gloves to rubber-coated stretch cloth gloves, not to mention goatskin gloves, suede and cloth gloves, cotton jersey gloves, Thinsulate gloves with vinyl reinforcement, cowhide gloves and open-finger wool gloves with leather palms.



Pre-rotated finger design improves fine motor skills and fit.

Ergonomic design via breathable web/motion zones provides improved comfort, fit and performance.

Form-fitting wrist closure provides wrist support and keeps glove debris-free.

The bionic gardening gloves I have worn and loved for the past month have outperformed any other glove. I tested the Bionics with an intensive two-week "vacation" of hectic weeding, transplanting, bed-digging, brush-clearing, mulch moving, walnut-raking, seed-gathering and path-making, during which time I washed the gloves once.

I also found/find myself wearing the Bionics for driving the lawn mower and car, for riding horses and mucking out the barn, not to mention having put them on occasionally in the house just because they make my hands feel good.

In addition to a touch of arthritis and a sneaking suspicion of carpal-tunnel issues, I have a cold-sensitivity problem that makes some of my fingers go temporarily numb when I get chilled.

The gloves, with strategic pressure points and near-custom fit, clearly offer more than clean fingernails. They simply make my hands feel better.

Why do the Bionics work so well?

Among the reasons is padding to relieve pressure points on all the digits and palm, plus an anatomically placed neoprene and Velcro cuff for wrist-joint support.

At first, it seemed as if the glove was short along the palm for me, but it is that way to support the actual stress point or axis of the wrist, which is located at the bottom of the palm above the wrist creases.

The gloves also have expansion joint over the knuckles and moisture ports between the fingers. They are made of seductively soft but tough sheepskin from an Indonesian company that otherwise operates in the realm of high-end leather garments.

WHY WOULD a sports-equipment company want to make gardening gloves?

Passion, said the glove designer, hand surgeon Jim Kleinert of Louisville.

This man has seen and repaired a lot of hands in his career as one of the nation's top hand specialists. Jim Kleinert, M.D., became Jim Kleinert, director of research and development for the Bionic division of H&B by chance.

On sabbatical in 1998 from his practice and from teaching at the University of Louisville, Kleinert took a tour of the Slugger museum. A conversation with Bill Clark, president of the



Louisville Hockey Division of H&B, ensued. A casual inquiry about Kleinert's interest in looking at a hockey glove was the first step in what has become a long glove-discovery journey.

The next step was a trip to Canada to talk with hockey players, said Kleinert. It was the low side of a high learning curve. Kleinert, who knew nothing about hockey, found himself inspecting hockey players' hands, inquiring where these hands had issues and what players needed a glove to do. He was introduced to "VOC," the voice of the customer, a sacred concept in new-product development, he said.

Kleinert and the R&D team came up with, eventually, four new hockey gloves, each an improvement on previous ones. The various stages from traditional to Bionic hockey glove hang on the wall in Kleinert's office on Main Street.

FOR A GARDENER, the difference between wearing a traditional glove and a Bionic hockey glove is stunning, like the difference between wearing a plaster hand cast and silk glove liners.

"That was really the passion," Kleinert said. "Could we make a better glove?" Could it be more flexible and yet have more padding to make it more comfortable, functional and still protective without simultaneously making it cumbersome?

Success with hockey gloves led, naturally enough, to the notion of a Bionic batting glove.

This phase gave Kleinert new interrogation skills, he said. He and the staff visited batting cages and bullpens, interviewing kids and professionals.

"It's hard to make a better product. We went through a lot of testing and evaluation, a lot of prototypes," Kleinert said. There were seven prototype batting gloves before the eighth one passed muster.

It was very much VOC, said Kleinert.

The Bionic gardening glove, also, has been test-gardened by 65 gardeners, most in Kentucky and Southern Indiana but also some working in Florida, Illinois and Boston.

The quest for the best was teamwork too, Kleinert said. Meetings with staff often led to improvements, such as a third line of stitching on the palm of the Bionic gardening glove that was a suggestion from H&B President Jack Hillerich.

"It's been a very interesting process. You get so passionate about a better product," said Kleinert, who no longer practices hand surgery but does occasional volunteer teaching at the U of L medical school and peer review of potential articles for the Journal of Hand Surgery.

ALTHOUGH THE gardening gloves require six more steps in production than the new batting glove, enough had been learned from developing the batting and hockey gloves that the gardening gloves had to go through only three prototypes.

Gardeners wearing them have been unanimous, returning written comments that mention "soft-fit," "easy movement," "oneness-feel," "shock-absorbing capability." One tester responded: "I wrote this wearing the gloves. They have incredible flexibility."

Indeed they do. You can button and unbutton your flannel work shirt while wearing them. You can pick up small seeds, open packets, write labels and go directly to grabbing abrasive chicken grit to toss around the hostas to foil the slugs.

The gloves probably won't hold up to a lot of large-rock moving, as one tester noted, but I suspect the one thing you may not have to do if you wear the gloves is open an ibuprofen bottle.

For my hands, the anatomical design extends gardening time with less cramping and fatigue. The gloves permit better grip and motor use with less tension, and so I am able to work "softer."

The Bionic Technology Division isn't finished, said Vickie Boisseau, director of sales and marketing. The glove future for the sporting-goods company includes a hard look at gloves for soccer goalies, a new youth infield baseball glove, competitive sailing gloves, golf gloves, driving and work gloves.

"Gardening" runs each Thursday. Write Diane Heilenman at The Courier-Journal, 525 W. Broadway, P.O. Box 740031, Louisville, Ky. 40201-7431. Questions also can be answered by your county agricultural extension service. In Bullitt County, call 543-2257; in Jefferson County, 425-4482; Oldham County, 222-9453; Shelby County, 633-4593. In Clark County, Ind., call 256-4591; in Floyd County, Ind., call 948-5470.

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