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PERSONAL ASSISTANT

Gloves fit for the dirty work

By Lili Singer, Special to The Times

In my youth, I never wore garden gloves. They were awkward, ill-fitting and shattered the intimacy between my hands and the earth. I wore my wounds with pride, each one a badge of fortitude and passion.

Once bloody, blistered, skewered and swollen, I now avoid pain whenever possible and treat my aging hands with the respect they deserve.



Something else has changed since I first picked up a trowel — garden gloves.

They are sized for men, women and kids. They are finely crafted from a menagerie of hides and high-tech materials in spiffy, hard-to-lose colors, and with all sorts of ergonomic bells and whistles. Rather than get in the way, they let you feel what you're doing. They are stylish, even sexy. Some look (and originally were) designed for biking, riding or a trip to the moon. Others could pass at a wedding or the opera.

Even the \$1.99 cotton job with the little rubber grip dots has evolved. Thanks to the addition of Spandex, the one-size-fits-all Utility Gardener from Tahoe is almost as sleek and form-fitting as pricier lightweight gloves.

With so many options — and winter chores beckoning — you may wonder which to buy. For opinions, I asked five avid gardeners to join me in comparing 18 styles from five glove makers. All are available online or by mail, and some at nurseries, garden shops and public gardens.

We evaluated design, construction, dexterity, fit and tactile sensation. And my quite unscientific panel reached a surprising consensus, giving top honors to the two-buck Tahoes along with the most expensive pair sampled: Bionic Gardening Gloves at about \$50 a pop.

Such high prices are not unusual. "People want quality," says Kathleen Smith, a nursery sales rep. "And after goatskin, nothing will suit."

At \$25, Foxgloves (www.foxglovesgardengloves.com) have a devoted following. Modeled after 1950s dress gloves, they fit like the proverbial glove and come in such beautiful shades as iris purple, delphinium blue, fuchsia pink and compost brown.

None of the testers wanted to take them off. One wanted to wear them to church, another for driving. Nylon and Spandex offer durability, “four-way stretch” and surprising warmth. Still, testers questioned their use for really rough work.

For repotting, planting and other messy jobs, you want gloves that keep your hands dry. The much-imitated Mud Glove (\$8, <http://www.mudgloves.com>) is 100% cotton knit dipped in brightly colored or pastel natural latex.

Thick, puncture-resistant gloves are smart garden attire for rose- and tree- pruning, heavy planting and cleanup, fence repair and the like. Most gardeners prefer leather, and today’s market offers a variety of hides. “All byproducts of the food industry,” I was relieved to hear from Dorian Winslow, owner of Womanswork Gloves (www.womanswork.com).

My well-worn pair of Original Womanswork (\$24), in suede pigskin with the palm patch, has grown softer with time. The testers were impressed by the Kidswork glove (\$15), a perfect miniature that offers real protection for little gardeners.

At our testing, the “second skin” prize went to Tahoe (www.tahogloves.com) for its supple Gloversville Goatskin. We tried several styles, at \$30 to \$40. For good looks and comfort, the Womanswork Cuffed Gardener’s Goatskin glove (\$26) was another big favorite.

If thorny, itchy or scratchy plants are your thing, consider gloves with arm- shielding leather or nylon gauntlets. Both the Womanswork (\$28.50) and Tahoe American Beauty (\$40) rated highly.

The West County line started as bicycle gloves. The work gloves (\$20) feature snug-fitting Velcro cuffs, a terrycloth brow wipe and breathable all- man-made materials (garden gloves for vegans!). Testers found them somewhat constricting but liked the intense colors. They thought West County’s 3/4 Finger gloves (\$20) were neat, though, and would be handy for sowing or hand weeding.

Over time, such tasks can take their toll. Enter the Bionic Gardening Gloves (\$50, <http://www.bionicgloves.com>), designed by hand surgeon Jim Kleinert and named best all-around garden gloves by all six covetous testers. These gloves are impressive, with scientific padding, anatomical relief pads, breathable web/motion zones, form-fitting wrist closure and cabretta leather.

Beauty and trappings aside, what really matters is fit. Glove sizes vary by maker and style, so try them on before buying. If ordering by mail, follow the sizing chart and return them if they don’t hug your digits just right.

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