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35,000 Antique Garden Tools And Still Collecting

Mark Morrison used his career in international landscape design and construction to assemble a unique collection of antique garden tools. His collection of 35,000+ tools includes a few ice cutters and some horse-drawn equipment. However, the vast majority of his collection consists of garden tools. They range from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries to the present day. Most are European in origin and include everything from specialty shovels to scythes, sharpeners and anvils, as well as walking canes with trowel ends for digging weeds.

"Most metal tools over the centuries were gathered up at one time or another and melted down for munitions by various governments," says Morrison. "Mine survived. I have a lot of garden shears from the 1700s that are still sharp, and more than 600 watering cans, 200 from France alone."

He notes that the English watering cans are more utilitarian.

"The French are copper, brass and tin, and absolutely beautiful," says Morrison.

He relishes the sturdy nature of the old tools while acknowledging how heavy they can be.

"We started buying old tools with metal handles for my landscape construction company," he recalls. "The workers would break the newer wooden handles."

While he admits that some good gardening

tools are still made today, you have to find specialty suppliers.

"You can buy a cheap pruning tool at Home Depot or pay from \$85 to \$150 for a heavy-duty, well-made one," says Morrison. "The former may not last the season, while the well-made one can be handed down to the next generation."

Morrison has hunted down well-made tools from Germany, China and some made by the Berbers of North Africa. However, the bulk of his tools are British, French and Dutch.

"They were the gardeners," he says. "It's tough to find tools from the U.S., as we didn't have the grand gardening tradition. Most old American tools you find are junk."

Morrison became serious about his collecting hobby about 20 years ago.

"I went to England and met some people, and got a lot of old tools you couldn't get today," says Morrison. "I still go to flea markets, but you can go to any number of websites online, such as eBay U.K., where there's a chance of finding older tools."

As his collection has grown, Morrison has become more selective about what he adds. He prefers tools with a label that includes a history or description of their use. He also prefers tools that haven't been restored.

"I don't want them polished or too shiny," he says. "Many of the watering cans I've

collected are dented from being lowered into a well for filling and then getting battered being lifted out. I try to leave things the way they are."

Morrison has filled two buildings on his property and is working to fill a third. He's curated his collection himself, measured tools, and had a local welder make appropriate display brackets. He looks for old tables and vintage tool chests with pull-out drawers to display some of his tools.

He has a good collection of tools designed for women and children, as well as tools displayed by type and era.

"I have a big collection of 6-in. to 4-ft long daisy grubbers with their fulcrum to pry weeds out of the ground," says Morrison. "When I first started collecting, I was known on eBay as the 'king of daisy grubbers.' I also have a hedge-clipping timeline with everything from 17th-century bill hooks to sickle tools and cutting shears, to modern gas and then electric and more recent battery-powered hedge trimmers."

While he has a special appreciation for older handcrafted tools for their balance and often beautiful handles, his collection also includes 20th-century tools. In fact, he's designating his third building for them.

"I have a pretty good selection of Ames,

True Temper and others, with racks for hand tools from the 1940s through the 1980s," says Morrison.

Morrison notes that it's often easier to find a tool from past centuries than from more recent years, and often from unexpected sources.

"I found a beautifully engraved trowel with a bone handle in England that was made for a man in Milwaukee, Wis.," he says. "A lot of tools were signed or had initials carved in them."

Morrison notes that his collection is the largest of its kind in the world. It's generally not open to the public, but he does host small tours, and arrangements can be made to view it.

"I like to keep groups to under 15," he says. "I've also offered tours to benefit causes I support."

Morrison is unsure of the collection's future. While he feels it's worthy of a Smithsonian-type museum, it's mostly European-made.

"I'd prefer it to stay together, as there's a historical value that should be saved," he says. "I'll definitely be doing a book on it."

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Rathbone donated his collection of nearly 6,000 wrenches, along with other agricultural memorabilia, to the Owyhee County Historical Museum in Idaho. Wrenches are organized alphabetically by the issuing company.



Large Ag Memorabilia Collection Donated To Idaho Museum

Retired Idaho farmer Pete Rathbone says he woke up one morning in 2025 to a small voice telling him it was time to move on from adding to his collection of nearly 6,000 wrenches and other agricultural memorabilia.

"I've had these displayed at my R-Lucky Star farm for years, and if I'd sell 'em, I'd have to box 'em all up and take 'em to the Midwest, because that's where all the collectors are," he says. "That would've been a huge process, so instead I decided to give them all to the Owyhee County Historical Museum."

Rathbone's collection was graciously accepted, as was his check to fund a 30-ft. by 60-ft. building addition to display it. Museum Director Eriks Garsvo says the col-

lection is truly amazing and will be a major attraction, especially given its organization.

"The wrenches are displayed just like he had them at his farm, alphabetically by the company that made and issued them," Garsvo says. "Pete had help from his son, neighbors and a Boy Scout troop to hang the wrenches on hooks on the pegboard walls."

Over 40 years of collecting, Rathbone gathered nearly 6,000 wrenches from more than 1,000 companies.

"Having them in alphabetical order by company was the easiest way to keep track of what I had and what they were used for," Rathbone says. "Any company that made farm equipment, steam engines, small engines, cream separators, household mechanical items, or horse-drawn equipment issued

wrenches. They're all different sizes, shapes and configurations."

Many of them were issued by companies no longer in business, while others are from well-known names such as Deere, Case, International Harvester and Aermotor. An antique picker helped him acquire wrenches from Italy, England, Germany and the Netherlands.

Rathbone says he found many of his wrenches while traveling with his wife to antique stores and swap meets.

"I was president of the sugar beet association for 16 years, and we'd drive to winter meetings in warmer states. We'd go dot-to-dot, visiting cast-iron seat collectors and antique stores," Rathbone says. "On one trip, we came home with 375 wrenches in the back of our Oldsmobile."

Rathbone says it's almost impossible to place a value on the collection, noting that some extremely rare wrenches might sell for several thousand dollars at auction. A Nebraska collector was offered \$30,000 for a TR590 Deere cutout like one Rathbone has, issued for a Dain All-Wheel-Drive tractor. Fewer than a dozen were made, and few are known to exist. The collector promptly declined the offer.

Rathbone also gave the museum his collection of cast-iron machinery seats, sugar and potato sacks, cast-iron grain seeder side plates, a giant cast-iron eagle, hand corn planters, small corn shellers, garden-style push plows, and several metal signs. A 2 by

4 barn frame built inside the addition holds his display of wheeled hay carriers.

Rathbone used his collecting hobby to launch another venture. Over 15 years, he researched and published four books on old-time farm implement companies and the wrenches they issued. The books match part numbers to companies and include a price guide based on sales at public auctions. Newer editions of the books incorporate corrections submitted and verified by other collectors. Stories about Rathbone's wrench collection and the books he's written appear in FARM SHOW Vol. 40, No. 4, and in Best of FARM SHOW Vol. 17 and Vol. 18.

"When people ask why I started collecting, I tell them that as a kid growing up in Los Angeles, I was always interested in farming. I wrote to 40 agricultural colleges and asked for their bulletins. I wrote to John Deere several times, and they sent me literature along with color posters that had metal grommets on the corners. One of them was huge and showed how grain flowed through a self-propelled 55 combine. Those somehow got thrown away. I sure wish I had them now."

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