



## The Subsistence Gardener

# What sort of Hoe should I get?

**W**hen we moved to France thirty years ago, I brought with me my old English gardening tools. It was quite a comprehensive collection, and included several versions of the sort of hoe that you use for weeding in the vegetable garden – a sharp blade of some sort on the end of a wooden handle.

I was therefore surprised to see my new neighbour earthing up his potatoes with what looked like an African-style hoe – a relatively-heavy piece of metal fixed at a right angle to the handle. Over the course of the following few months, it became apparent that, apart from a sickle, this was the only garden tool that he had, and he used it for everything.

At the time, we were trying to grow our vegetables in raised beds, and did not see how his sort of hoe would make life easier; but, a few years later, we were able to extend our garden by buying the neighbouring field. We wanted to grow more crops, and, in particular, cereals with which we could make bread. After a few initial attempts to work the ground with a large rotovator kindly lent to us by a friend, we realised that we had to develop a coherent plan. On the one hand, we could invest in some heavy equipment – which would probably involve buying a tractor and some implements to go with it (an option that did not seem very appealing) – or we could find a way of doing the work by hand. Our neighbour's hoe came to mind.

We took the simplest option when choosing which hoe to buy – a trip to the local garden centre/farming supply store, and bought what they had to offer. In retrospect, they were probably mass-produced hoes, made in China from relatively soft metal, and even though they were inexpensive, the garden centre had probably put a substantial mark up on them. However, they did the job: over the

course of a few years, we were able to get about a third of a hectare of our field under cultivation, using our hoes to break up ground that was heavily compacted, devoid of life, and, in places, full of stones. The hoes were worn out in the process, each year getting a little smaller, and a little rounder.

Over the years since then our collection of hoes has expanded to include implements of all shapes and sizes. Most of them came from a monthly second-hand market that we organised in a local village. There seems to have been a time in Brittany, probably in the years after the war, when farming started to become more commercial, and people focussed on boosting production of particular crops that they could then sell. Local blacksmiths responded by making all sorts of specialist hoes – long thin ones, short pointed ones, heart-shaped ones, hoes set at different angles to the handle, etc. – each with a specific use. In addition, in the days when people got their tools hand-made by the local blacksmith, each blacksmith probably made their own style of hoe, depending on how they had been trained, which would itself have given rise to small regional variations in the exact size and shape of even the basic all-purpose hoe.

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On a worldwide scale, differences in the hoes that people use could be due to the materials that they have had available, differences in the types of soil being worked, the different crops that they grew, and different ways of working. Historically, it is reasonable to assume that agriculture started with people using hoes made out of a stone attached to a wooden handle – and that, judging by the success of agriculture, must also have worked well.

The conclusion that I have drawn from all of this, is that one should not worry too much about trying to find the perfect hoe before starting work. It is best to limit one's ambitions to working an area of land that can be managed with the tools that you have, or which are readily available. We do use some of our specialist hoes for hoeing between the rows of cereals, but the basic hoe is still the tool that we use the most; for the past few years I have been using a hand-forged hoe, made in Italy and sold in France by La Frontière (<https://la-frontiere.fr/boutique/houe-toscana-qualite-speciale-avec-manche-en-bois-140cm>). It is definitely a better tool than the hoe that I started out with, but I have no regrets about all those days spent breaking up compacted soil, and wearing out my old mass-produced, garden-centre hoe in the process.

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