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With the exception of his hands, which look like they might date back to the Middle Ages, blacksmith and toolmaker Bob Denman looks, at minimum, 20 years younger than he really is. It's hard to know whether that youthfulness stems from the physical conditioning provided by days spent hefting and hammering red-hot cast iron by hand, or from the explosive verve with which Denman approaches life. After a full career in advertising and nursery retail, Bob and his wife, Rita, moved from Orange County to Boring, Oregon, in search of a more rural community and a quieter way of life. But instead of retiring, a new project beckoned, and now Bob is making some of the most beautiful functional objects in Oregon.



# IRONS IN THE FIRE

written by MARGARETT WATERBURY  
photography by SHAWN LINEHAN

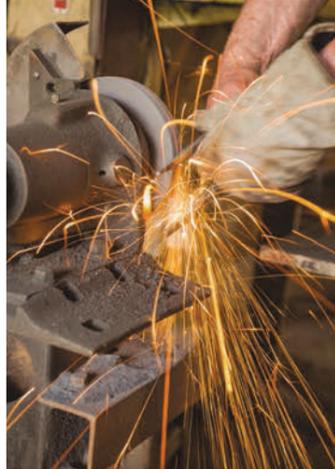
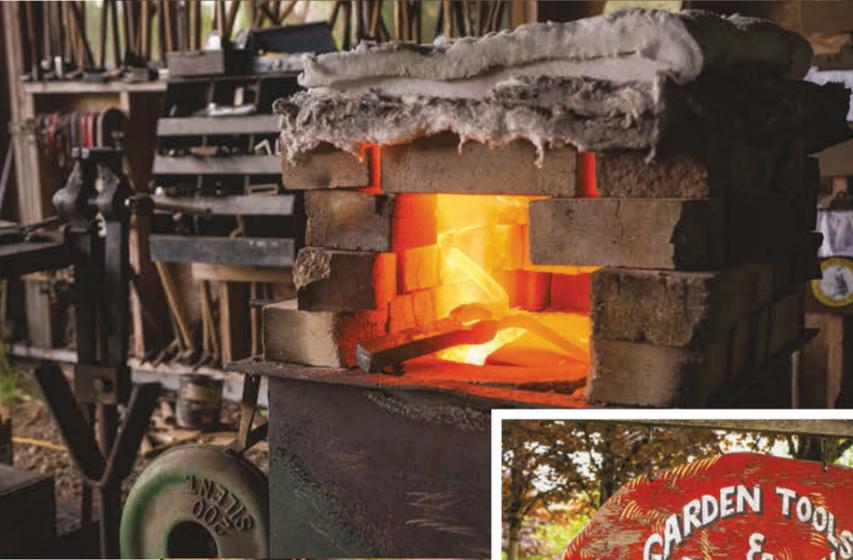


TALL, FIT AND WITH THE IMPISH EYES AND LIGHTNESS OF EXPRESSION that invariably signals a life lived surrounded by interesting and engaging projects, Bob and his wife, Rita, live in the oldest farmhouse in Boring, Oregon. Together, they run Red Pig Garden Tools, a national beacon for people who are not willing to compromise when it comes to their tools.

Although they're made entirely by hand, there's nothing twee or delicate about the garden implements at Red Pig Garden Tools. Bob makes tools that are meant to be used – a lot. “Machines used to be made to last forever, to do work every day for a hundred years,” he says, leaning over a pockmarked workshop table. “If you're earning your living with a tool, you want something stout, strong, well-built, something you can depend on. My warranty on my tools is my life or yours, whichever ends first.”

Bob makes everything himself, all the way down to some of the tools he uses to make other tools. In his workshop, there is something called a “mechanical hammer” a time-saving device for blacksmiths who don't want to hammer everything by hand. He never uses it, instead preferring to hammer each tool by hand from start to finish. Forged tools are made from a single piece of iron, one solid slab that is heated, pulled, and hammered into shape, then cooled and mounted on wooden handles. It's skilled work. “You can learn the basics in a couple of weeks, but it takes a long time to get good at hammering.”

Blacksmithing isn't his first career. The son of a tool and die maker who worked as a blacksmith on the side converting confiscated German and Japanese arms from WWII into sporting rifles, Bob says he couldn't have been less interested in blacksmithing as a young man. Instead, he became a journalist, then moved into marketing, advertising, and PR. He worked for big-name companies like Ogilvy & Mather and Young and Rubicam, ran a freelance design studio, and dabbled in art direction.



Bob and his apprentice, a local 22-year-old woman, work out of a smithy inside a converted garage in his back yard. “As a blacksmith, the things you do are simple: you can stretch steel thinner in one or more dimensions; you can push steel back onto itself; or you're swedging (putting a dent in it), or bending, or twisting. The combination makes up the skills of

blacksmithing. But to be a good blacksmith, you have to be under great control. When you strike something, you receive signals through your ears, your eyes, the sensation of heat and vibration, that all help you decide how high to lift the hammer, how hard to hit the tool, what angle to use, and where to strike. It's all happening in a micro-second.”



Bob built his two-story store from timber salvaged from two nearby historic barns. He's now constructing a new shop right next door made from the pieces of another salvaged barn, this one from Albany, Oregon. He's forged custom hinges and hardware for the building, and plans to install a rainwater catchment system. Some of the boards are 36 feet long, hearkening back to the golden days of Oregon forestry.



Then in the 80's, burnt out on advertising, Bob started a specialty nursery in Orange County. After a motorcross injury, Bob invented a pair of pants with built-in kneepads to use while gardening. They were very popular, so popular that they were quickly replicated by then-giant garden supply firm Smith & Hawken.

Rather than pursue a potentially unwinnable lawsuit, Bob decided to move on and design his first line of forged tools, which he commissioned from a nearby blacksmith named Monte Haberman who would later become his mentor. Things went well for a few years, and the business grew. But then a problem began to emerge. "Monte was doing more fishing and less work every year. The writing was on the wall: it was time to learn."

So, in his 40s, Bob took up the hammer. Today, he's using some of his father's old tools. "I guess you can run from your heritage, but you can't hide." When he's not smithing, Bob is hard at work on a book on the history of tools from Timber Press, and travels throughout the Northwest for speaking engagements.

Red Pig Garden Tools makes an amazing range of tools, from the familiar (trowels) to the obscure, like the Victorian-era Ball Weeder, a narrow, two-pronged weeder mounted on handle with a ball at its neck the size of an orange. That ball creates a wide fulcrum point that lets you pry tough weeds like dandelions and creeping wood-sorrel out of wet ground without sinking into the soil.

Inspired by the rich late 19th century tradition of hand tools, Bob frequently revives and reimagines traditional implements for modern users. Many of Red Pig's tools are made specifically for our Northwest soils, like the clay spade, a sharp, narrow digging implement that looks a bit like an edging shovel with most of the interior of the spade cut away. Those cutaways mean less drag through our heavy, dense clay soils than a regular spade, a difference Bob describes as cutting a block of Tillamook cheddar with a chef's knife versus a cheese wire.

He's also designed a wicked-looking long tool called a Blackberry Hook ideal for eradicating the almost-unstoppable invasive Himalayan blackberry. A chisel tip cuts into thick canes from the front, while a sharpened hook then completes the cut from the back, ensuring that the stems fall away from you instead of towards and preventing "a close personal relationship" with the thorny canes.

Red Pig Garden Tools also does custom commissions, from standard tools of unusual size to gorgeous custom hinges and hardware. He's made adaptive tools designed for people who use wheelchairs or suffer from severe arthritis, and specially reinforced tools for extraordinarily heavy use.

The store is a destination in its own right: located at 12040 Revenue Road in Boring, Oregon, the hand built two-story barn houses an incredible collection of historic and contemporary tools, [redpigttools.com](http://redpigttools.com)

