

# Treating Feet

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Though foot skin is similar to hand skin, the problem gardeners usually have to deal with on their feet is wetness. Proper footwear is the best protection.

Look for shoes and boots that *breathe* and absorb perspiration from feet. Dyed leather and canvas absorb perspiration well. Be aware of the insole material since perspiration is greatest from the bottom of feet. Insoles that specify the ability to keep feet dry can be obtained over-the-counter at drugstores. Absorbent material should be used under feet as well as around them.

The gardener who wears leaky shoes or boots risks developing *trench foot* from prolonged exposure to moisture. Unfortunately, waterproof boots can hold moisture in as well as keep it out, so make a good choice in socks. Orlon or polypropylene socks help wick moisture away from the skin. Cotton doesn't wick moisture away it actually keeps sweat close to the skin. Wool socks can be warm even when wet, and are good when worn with a wicking fabric sock liner close to the skin. When socks get too wet and no longer wick water away, change to dry socks.

For really wet feet, cotton balls between the toes will help. Dusting with an absorbent powder will also help. Dust feet, not the floor or carpet, by putting your foot in a paper bag before shaking out the powder. If you have excessively wet palms and soles, Drysol can be obtained by prescription.

*Prepared by Mary Predny from an article written by Bonnie Appleton and Sam Selden for NMPro magazine.*

*Project Director: Diane Relf*

*Reviewers: Dawn Alleman, Bonnie Appleton, Traci Gilland, Alan McDaniel*

*For more information on selection, planting, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension Office. If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your Extension agent about becoming an Extension Master Gardener. For bi-monthly gardening information, subscribe to The Virginia Gardener Newsletter by sending your name and address and a check for \$5.00 made out to "Treasurer, Va. Tech" to The Virginia Gardener, Department of Horticulture, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 124061-0349. Horticultural information is also now available on the Internet by connecting with Virginia Cooperative Extension at <http://www.ext.vt.edu>.*

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## Gardening and Your Health:

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## Protecting Your Hands and Feet

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## Skin Moderation

The skin on hands and feet is like most ornamental plants. Neither likes the extremes of being dried out or kept too wet. Treat skin as tenderly as the most sensitive plants and safeguard your horticultural health.

Skin and nails on hands and feet can be damaged by drying, cold, chemicals, sun exposure, or persistent wetness. Soil and potting mixes, whether in the garden or in containers, deplete moisture from the skin on hands and fingers. Prolonged contact with soil can be very drying to your hands. Add the abrasive effect of grit in soil, and skin begins to lose its protective barrier to further water loss. As water loss from skin increases, it loses flexibility, and skin may begin to crack like dry leather. This can lead to further loss of water, wounding skin and underlying tissues.

While air circulation can have many advantages for your plants such as reducing pest problems, it can also speed up water evaporation from your skin. Combine the effects of water loss from wind with water loss from soil, and hands can chap severely enough to lead to eczema. Eczema is inflamed skin with red, itchy, cracked, even blistering areas, which may require medical treatment.

## Preventing Dry Hands

To prevent dry skin, the best protection is a dry fabric barrier between the skin and soil. In other words, wear appropriate gloves and shoes. Pick gloves appropriate for different garden chores. Cotton jersey is good for all around work, while thick leather gloves are good for wet work or work around plants with thorns or spines. For really wet work, including handling chemicals, wear rubber or plastic gloves with cotton liners.

*If lips chap easily, moisturize them frequently.*

When cotton gloves get wet, change them immediately. When handling chemicals make sure that none gets inside your rubber gloves. Wet chemicals have a more toxic effect on the skin if trapped inside gloves, and the risk of an irritant or allergic reaction to the chemicals increases.

When gardening requires a fine touch despite the cold, cut the ends of gloves on the first three fingers of the dominant hand (Figure 1). In very cold weather, mittens are better than gloves; fingers stay warmer if they're not separated from each other by fabric. Leather mittens are probably the best insulator against cold and wind.

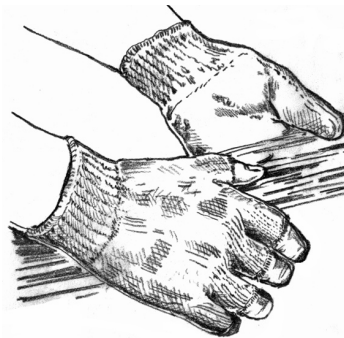


Figure 1. Cut the ends of gloves on the first three fingers of the dominant hand.

## Treating Dry Hands

Dry skin needs moisturization. The best moisturizer is water, but adding water alone to dry skin aggravates the condition through chapping, where skin splits and becomes rough and sore.

A barrier of natural oils, like the waxy cuticle on a leaf, prevents water from the skin being quickly lost into the air. Remember that air circulation around wet skin increases evaporation and chapping.

Evaporation is slowed by frequently applying petrolatum, glycerin, or lanolin-based skin

care products. Don't use lotions or oils - they are too thin and won't work on thick palm and finger skin. After hands get wet, apply cream or ointment to damp skin.

An easy way to keep fingers and skin soft and supple is to soak hands in tepid water at bedtime, apply petroleum jelly thickly, then don gloves for overnight moisturization.

Fertilizers are salts and pull moisture out of skin. Wear gloves and wash hands immediately if fertilizers contact skin.

## Treating Fingernails

Don't forget fingernails when moisturizing. Nails are more than 10% water. As with skin, when water is lost from fingernails, so is elasticity. Dry nails crack rather than bend (Figure 2).

Long nails get dirtier and are more likely to catch on objects and peel back from the nail bed than short nails. Constantly cleaning accumulated dirt from under a separated nail adds to the problem.

When applying moisturizer, work it from the hand down to the fingernails, coating the nails. Moisturize cuticles too. Cuticles are a seal to prevent moisture from getting under the nail folds.

Apply an extra amount of moisturizer on the side nail folds to stop hangnails. To ease the most painful site for skin cracks, also work moisturizer under fingernails.

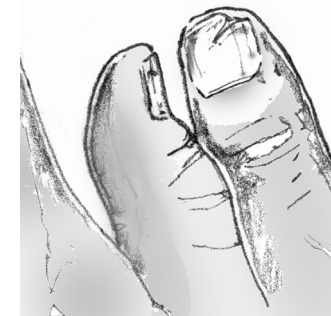


Figure 2. Dry fingernails crack rather than bend.