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MADE IN THE U.S.A CobraHead

An historic American farming implement gets a modern facelift from a Wisconsin tool inventor.



I'm pretty sure my Indiana granddad had one of those ancient, hard-working tools that looked like a steel claw at the end of a long, wooden handle. Often called a five-tined garden cultivator, it was perfect for breaking through compact soil to prepare for seed planting. According to **Noel Valdes** of **CobraHead LLC**, based in Cambridge, Wis., "Every American tool manufacturer of note made the cultivator, but rototillers put them out of business and so no one makes them anymore."

Old-timers hung onto their timeworn cultivators, and so did Noel, who has discovered through research that makers held patents for the tool dating back to the pre-Civil War era.

Several years ago, one of the five tines fell off of the handle of his vintage cultivator. Before trying to reattach it, Noel noted the arched shape and flattened tip (which kind of resembles a cobra's head) and recalls that, "I literally got down on my hands and knees and started pulling weeds out with it."

The lone tine pulled up weeds better than any other tool in Noel's potting shed. "I had a cerebral moment and I knew it was going to be a hit, because it was so obvious. Once I realized I couldn't buy this as a tool, I knew I would have to manufacture it myself."

No stranger to factories, Noel has spent his career in the construction glass industry. He figured that a standard piece of square steel with one tip shaped into the flattened, pointed tip for weeding, plus a handle, would be easy to manufacture in his state. "Like a lot of good tools, they don't have to be complicated to work," he says.

However, because so many U.S. toolmakers have moved operations overseas, it was a challenge to make domestically. "I knew right away that I didn't want to bring this to China. My heart wasn't in it. My politics weren't in it," he admits. "I wanted to market this tool as Wisconsin-made. My motivation wasn't even so much 'American-made' as 'locally made.'"

Community is important to me, and I sure didn't want to hop on a plane to Beijing if I had a problem with my tools. By making them locally, even though it might be a little more expensive, I'm able to resolve any issues in person."

It took some hunting before Noel found **Green Bay Drop Forge**, a machine shop that also fabricates parts for the automotive and agricultural industries. The company president was a gardener and he agreed to manufacture the original CobraHead Weeder and Cultivator in 2002. A Madison, Wisconsin-based molding shop makes the recycled plastic blue handle, its shape based on a hammer replacement handle sold at big box stores. Since then, thousands of the weeding tool have been made and sold here in the U.S., priced at \$24.95 retail.

Noel added a long-handle CobraHead Weeder and Cultivator in 2007 (satisfying requests from those who remembered the vintage cultivator and priced at \$59.95 retail). In 2017, he introduced the Cobra Head "mini" Weeder and Cultivator (\$21.95 retail). This year, the company is expanding into the small-scale agriculture market with a broadfork tool for no-till farming (\$245 retail).

I thought the "mini" CobraHead was developed to better-fit women's hands, but Noel says the scaled-down tool is for anyone who wants to do precision weeding and planting. "It's perfect for container gardening and fits in anybody's hand. Plus, people kept asking me for a version they could stick in their pocket." ■

Details: CobraHead LLC

Website: cobrahead.com, info@cobrahead.com

Wholesale: Contact the company for wholesale purchasing.

CobraHead sells to garden clubs, horticultural societies, botanical gardens and retailers with low minimum requirements.