



# Irons in the fire

Sneeboer has an international reputation for producing high quality garden tools but its methods remain close to home

PHOTOGRAPHS **RICHARD HANSON** WORDS **TAMSIN HOPE THOMSON**

**W**hen Dutch blacksmith Arie Sneeboer started his company in 1913, in a small shed, he could not have imagined that 95 years later his grandson would be supplying garden tools all over the world. Sneeboer is now a well-known brand, but the method remains age-old, using a traditional forge to make high quality tools. 'Why change a process that works?' Arie's grandson, Jaap, says.

In the small village of Bovenkarspel in the West Friesland area of Holland - where the company is still based - the soil is heavy clay, so the tools Arie made had to be strong. Using a coal fire, anvil and hammer he produced tools that would last. This priority is still a must for all Sneeboer tools, often described as 'the Rolls Royce of tools'. 'My grandfather said, "If you make a tool, make it good",' Jaap says. At that time Sneeboer's customers were local market gardeners, which provided only a seasonal demand. So, in low season, Arie turned his hand to plumbing, as did Jaap's father when he took over the company after the Second World War. Jaap is the first Sneeboer to make garden tools all year round.

He and his wife Wilma took over the company in 1986 and expanded, increasing the range of 50 tools to 200. Instead of market gardeners, Jaap supplies wholesalers, retailers, luxury mail order companies and private

gardeners, from the US to Japan - including several A-list celebrities. The market changed and Jaap moved to accommodate it. 'Now we send tools all over the world, and there is no low season,' Jaap says. Demand is higher than supply and that's the way he intends to keep it.

'We want to do everything ourselves,' Jaap says. This includes training his staff, which can take five to six years. The key to his success



seems to be cutting out middlemen and employing the majority of his family (eight out of 11 employees are relatives). As well as his two brothers, Aad and Frank, and sister Lilian, there are uncles and nephews welding and polishing all over the factory. 'I was in the forge almost the minute I could walk,' Jaap says. 'It must be in the genes.'

Frank mans one of the coal fires, plunging trowel heads into burning coals to strengthen the steel before hammering the sides to sharpen

the blade. In the background there is the slam of a giant 1920's sledgehammer. 'Old-fashioned machines have simple mechanisms - there is not so much to go wrong,' Jaap shouts. A maxim that applies to his business. By monitoring everything themselves the Sneeboers ensure nothing sub-standard goes out the door.

Of the 200 tools on offer, many are Jaap's innovations, inspired by talking to gardeners who can't find the right tool for the job. He releases about five new tools each year - some of which go to his UK supplier, Harrod Horticultural. 'They asked me for a scarifier so I got a few examples in to have a look at; they all had 14 to 18 knives! Once you had it in the ground it was impossible to move, so I cut the knives down to six. Now it's easy.'

It was the same with the rose-leaf picker, which his 85-year-old mother finds amazing, and the revolutionary bulb planter. 'It was most exciting when I thought of tapering,' Jaap says. 'I wanted a tube that would slide in and out of the soil easily and I thought, now how are we going to do this?'

It's obvious to Jaap why business is booming, 'I think we are original - because of the atmosphere of the team spirit. We create something with our hands from start to finish.'

Contact details for Harrod Horticultural. Tel: 0845 402 5300. [www.harrodhorticultural.com](http://www.harrodhorticultural.com)

**LEFT** Fired for strength. **ABOVE** Keeping it in the Sneeboer family (Jaap: front row, third from right). **BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Frank, with a fork glowing from the embers; branding on a trowel; welding on rake tines; using the 1920's sledgehammer; finished tools; the last stage - attaching ash handles.





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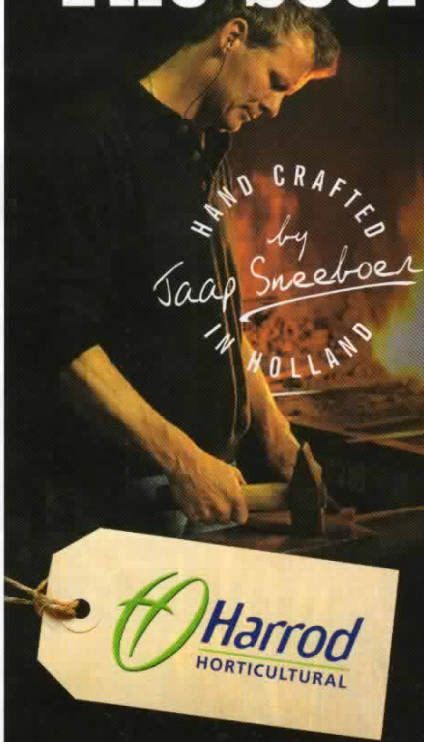
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