

Work Safely in the Garden

By Susan Camp

The first week of spring this year feels like January, but the days will grow warmer, and we will spend more time in our gardens, cleaning up debris from last year, and catching up on tasks delayed by the cold weather.

With the arrival of pleasant weather, there will be more trips to the Emergency Room for injuries, many of them preventable with careful planning and proper use of equipment. I used to tell nursing students that childhood accidents are almost always preventable if parents are alert and well-informed about safety issues.

Adults need safety reviews, too, especially after a long, sedentary winter in the house. If you haven't had much physical activity during the last few months, don't try to spend 6 or 8 hours working in the yard or garden on the first pleasant day. You will end up exhausted and with sore or strained muscles. Pace yourself. Take frequent rest periods and drink plenty of water to remain hydrated, even if the sun doesn't feel hot. Stop and rest anytime you feel breathless, fatigued, dizzy, or lightheaded.

Don't forget to use sunscreen, even on cloudy days, and wear a hat to protect your face and scalp from the sun's burning rays. Long sleeves and pants will help protect you from ticks, which are active year-round. Some gardeners use commercial insect repellent; others prefer to use natural or home-made products.

If you have arthritis, purchase hand tools with ergonomically correct handles that are easier to grasp and manipulate than regular tools. The tools may cost more, but the special grips will allow you to work efficiently with less strain to painful joints. Use the strong muscles in your legs, rather than your low back muscles, to pick up and haul heavy objects, like bags of mulch. Ask a family member or neighbor to help with difficult tasks.

Toppling ladders are funny only in cartoons. Throw away the 40-year-old wooden model with the wobbly legs and missing screws. Use a ladder of the appropriate height for the task. Move the ladder rather than reach to either side or too high. Always have an assistant hold the ladder steady.

Many serious injuries occur as a result of misuse or carelessness with power tools. Wear appropriate ear and eye protection, and make sure the lenses of your goggles are not scratched or smeared. Gloves provide protection for the hands, but they should fit snugly. Loose gloves plus a power saw could equal loose fingers on the garage floor. Loose clothing, long hair, and jewelry pose risks, too.

Use power tools for their intended purposes; I have said before that chainsaws don't belong on ladders. Operate gasoline-powered equipment outside to avoid inhaling noxious fumes and protect your lungs from sawdust or other debris by wearing a mask or respirator. Save your Margarita for after you finish using the table saw; alcohol and power tools don't mix. To avoid electrocution, take care not to sever electrical cords.

Children love to ride on lawnmowers and tractors, but these machines aren't toys and pose great risks. Mower and tractor accidents often result in horrific injuries. Young children should not operate power equipment until they reach the age and physical size and develop the cognitive reasoning ability to do so safely.

Pressure washers are dangerous tools, too, especially when set to high psi (pounds per square inch). The danger of severe injury is compounded if the operator is wearing flip-flops. My husband found this out the hard way. Always wear shoes with closed toes when operating power tools.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publications BSE-50P "Powered Hand Tools Safety: Lawn Care Training Guide" and BSE-51P "Hand Tools Safety: Lawn Care Training Guide" provide detailed information on safe use of specific power and hand tools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) "Gardening Health and Safety Tips" is another helpful publication. Here's to a safe and injury-free summer for all of us!

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