



Health Library

Gardening Hazards: How to Prevent Them

By Sue Licher

Gardening is relaxing and gratifying, but there are still things to watch out for. Here's a rundown of common gardening hazards, along with some tips to help you avoid them:

- Stretch before you start work. Backs, shoulders, arms, and hands get the brunt of the abuse from tilling the soil all day. A good routine of stretching exercises before you begin will help to get your muscles ready and prevent serious injury.
- Use proper lifting, squatting, and reaching techniques. When lifting from the ground, start from a squatting position and bend from the knees. If you're lifting from a truck bed, brace yourself against the bumper and try to get as close to the object you're moving as possible. Many gardeners also suffer sore knees from constant kneeling and lifting, so a good pair of kneepads or a portable foam pad you can move from place to place are a must.
- Rotate your tasks to give different muscle groups a rest, switching positions at least every 15 minutes. Know your physical limitations and when you should ask for help or use a wagon or cart.
- For heavier jobs that involve backhoes, augers, and other digging and trenching devices, get the proper training and follow safe operating procedures. US Consumer Product Safety Commission statistics show that some 230,000 people receive emergency room treatment each year from being injured by lawn and garden tools.
- Wear safety glasses and face shields when you're trimming the lawn and hedges to protect your eyes from wayward pebbles and stems.
- Some hearing problems are caused by the constant drone of leaf blowers and lawn mowers, so wear earplugs to reduce the risk of hearing loss.
- Sunscreen, sunglasses, long sleeves, and a hat are your primary weapons against the sun. Drink lots of water, as much as a cup every 15 to 30 minutes on a sweltering day. If you feel hot, protect yourself from heat exhaustion by taking plenty of breaks and going to cool off if necessary.
- Minimize the use of pesticides by using integrated pest management techniques and natural alternatives. If pesticides are necessary, always read the entire label before using them and follow the written precautions to the letter. Wear a respirator and skin protection while spraying, and make sure no one -- especially children -- enters the sprayed area before it's safe to do so. To avoid home contamination and exposure after pesticide use, always change your clothing before entering your home. (Wash your work clothes separately before re-using them.) Finally, wash your hands before and after leaving the garden or greenhouse.
- Itchy eyes and occasional skin rashes are common, but if allergies get more serious, see a doctor. Allergies change over a lifetime, and they can react to seasonal growth patterns. So just because you weren't allergic to something last month doesn't mean you won't be this month.
- In addition to wearing heavy gloves to protect yourself from cuts and scrapes, keep your first-aid kit well-stocked and make sure you get your tetanus booster shot every 10 years.
- The old adage "don't bother them and they won't bother you" usually works for bees. But if a bee or wasp does sting you, don't try to dig out the stinger with your fingers -- use tweezers or a needle. If you can't see it, use tape to pull out the stinger. (Carry a bee-sting kit with a syringe and epinephrine if you're allergic and might develop anaphylactic shock if stung.) If you know you're allergic or develop symptoms of a dangerous allergic reaction such as a severe rash, facial flushing, and shortness of breath, call 911.

- Nothing could seem much more innocent than potting soil, but National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is looking into reports that some vermiculite, the white material in potting soil, may be contaminated with dangerous levels of asbestos. Meanwhile, the agency urges people to treat vermiculite with caution.
- Remember, it's a dirty job. Microorganisms, including bacteria and fungi live in the ground, so before eating or wrapping it up for the day, wash your hands often with warm, soapy water.
- Finally, make sure your clients' children are indoors and supervised if you're using power equipment outside, and watch carefully when going around corners or backing up. Keep anything dangerous, like sharp tools or pesticides, locked out of reach.

Source: National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

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