

Gardening Safety

By Janet Scheren, Fairfax Master Gardener

Gardening is one of the healthiest activities you can enjoy— fresh air, exercise and the opportunity to add beauty to your environment with the benefit of growing food that is truly fresh and more nutritious than you can get from any store or market. Then there's the pure joy and mental stimulation of it all. One thing most of us probably don't think much about is gardening safety. What can be unsafe about gardening, right? The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, however, reports that more than 400,000 trips to the emergency room result from gardening-related accidents each year.

This spring, I became a statistical data point when I kneeled in the garden to pull weeds, only to wind up with a puncture wound in my shin. A broken stick was poking up from the ground. I didn't notice it until I had a gash in my leg. Then I did a dumb thing; I decided I could just clean it up with an antiseptic and put a bandage on. Two days later I was visiting the ER with a nasty, red-hot wound on my leg. The story has a happy ending. After the docs removed a few small splinters and prescribed a round of antibiotics, the wound is finally healing nicely. But it seemed a good time to review a few tips on garden safety.

GARDENING SAFETY TIPS

ASSH
American Society for Surgery of the Hand

NO REPETITIVE MOTIONS

Repetitive motions - such as digging, raking, trimming hedges, pruning bushes or planting bulbs - may cause skin, tendon, joint or nerve irritation. Make sure your gardening activities are varied, tasks are rotated every 15 minutes, and you allow a brief rest between each activity so that the same muscles are not used repetitively.

RELAX YOUR WRIST

Be sure your wrist is in a relaxed or neutral position. Studies have shown that you can lose up to 25% of grip strength when your wrist is bent.

WATCH FOR OBJECTS

Sharp objects and debris buried in the soil can cause serious cuts or injuries. Use a hand shovel or rake rather than your hand for digging.

WEAR GLOVES

Wearing gloves will not only reduce blistering but will also protect your skin from fertilizers, pesticides, bacteria and fungus in the soil. When exposed to soil, even the smallest cut can turn into a major hand infection.

USE THE RIGHT TOOLS

When purchasing pruners, loppers or shears, look for brands featuring a safety lock. Try to find tools without form-fitting grooves. Such tools do not fit all hands and can cause injuries or require more pressure to maintain control. As always, use tools for their intended purpose.

MORE THAN 400,000 gardening injuries are treated each year in the emergency room.

VISIT THE EMERGENCY ROOM IF....

- > Continuous pressure does not stop the bleeding after 15 minutes
- > You notice persistent numbness or tingling in the fingertip or have trouble moving the finger
- > You are unsure of your tetanus immunization status
- > You can't thoroughly cleanse the wound by rinsing with mild soap and clean water

VISIT WWW.HANDCARE.ORG FOR ADDITIONAL SAFETY TIPS.

Here's a compilation of some tips beyond the typical weekend warrior checklist that provide gardening safety advice from several reputable sources: the American Society of Hand Surgeons, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, a few health insurance companies and the UK's Royal Horticultural Society.

Wear gloves when working outside. Not only does this reduce blistering, but it also protects you from chemicals that may have been applied in the garden or lawn. When exposed to soil, even the smallest cut can turn into a significant infection. Wear leather gloves when pruning roses and other thorny plants.

Minor punctures from thorns can create swelling or infection—especially around joints and particularly from rose thorns. This even has its own name, rose thorn or rose gardener's disease, which can become a serious fungal disease traveling through the lymphatic system.

Watch for buried objects. Do a quick check of the garden area before you start your gardening tasks and remove any objects that could result in injury. Use a hand shovel or rake rather than your hand for digging. There's a reason that the American Society of Hand Surgeon has its own check list for gardening safety. Hands are among the body parts most injured in the garden.

Use the right tools and use them safely. Use tools that are properly sized for you and use tools for their intended purposes only. When purchasing pruners, loppers or shears, look for brands featuring a safety lock, and always follow the manufacturers' instructions.

- Inspect garden hand tools before each use for defects or damage, including splintered, loose, bent or cracked tool handles.
- Keep the cutting edges of garden hand tools sharp, and always cut away from the body.
- Use eye protection when the garden hand tool produces flying, crumbling, chipping, sparking or splintering debris.
- Stand with your back straight when using long-handled garden tools such as hoes, rakes and shovels, and avoid using garden hand tools above your shoulder height.
- Store tools and materials in safe places. A range of injury can be caused by stepping on, landing on or being hit with garden tools, such as shovels, rakes and trowels.

Use proper posture and ergonomically designed tools. Posture not only refers to whole body position but also to the angle of your wrist while using hand tools. Grip strength is at its maximum when the wrist is in a relaxed or neutral position. Look for tools that are labeled "ergonomic." These are designed to work naturally with your body to provide the most comfort.

Know Your Poisonous Plants

Before you or your children do any "hands on" weed removal, be sure you know how to identify poison ivy, sumac, oak and similar toxic plants. Find out ahead of time how to treat the rashes they cause to reduce the irritation.

Minimize exposure to disease and plant risks. Decomposing plant material and stagnant water can host bacteria, and other micro-organisms can create respiratory or other infectious diseases. These include two forms of Legionella (one is present in decomposing material; the other is multiplying in standing water between 68°F and 113°F). Several types of bacteria in the soil or water can enter wounds. Here are a few guidelines from the Royal Health Service in the UK to minimize the risks:

- Wear gloves whenever handling soil, compost, toadstools, potentially harmful plants, fertilizer or pesticides. Thin latex (or latex-free for allergy sufferers) gloves can be worn for delicate work.
- Do not open bags of compost or potting media with your head right over it.
- Fold over the top of compost bags when not in use.
- Avoid potting-up in confined spaces.
- Moisten dry potting media before use.
- Dampen down dry compost heaps before turning or use.
- Consider wearing a dust mask when turning compost heaps and handling potting media or other dusty materials.
- Avoiding storing potting media in greenhouses as these will heat up and may encourage Legionella.
- Empty the water out of garden hoses after use, and do not leave full hoses in the sun after use.
- Avoid splashing water around when watering pots.
- If the temperature of stored water for use in mist irrigation or sprinklers is above 68°F, do not use it.
- Only shred woody prunings in an open, well-ventilated area.
- Ensure tetanus shots are up to date. Otherwise, see your doctor for a tetanus shot if you cut yourself on a plant or get soil or manure in an open wound.
- Discourage rats by securing rubbish in bins and not putting cooked food on the compost heap.
- Rat-proof compost bins with wire mesh if necessary. To reduce the risks from salmonella, avoid using rat-infested compost on edible crops, especially those not cooked before consumption.
- Protect yourself from water-borne diseases such as Weil's disease, Leptospirosis, by wearing waterproof gloves, clothing and boots when clearing out ponds.
- Wear gloves and keep arms covered when pruning plants that can cause irritations; e.g. ivy, Hedera, flannel bush, Fremontodendron, spurge, Euphorbia or rue, Ruta.
- Always wash your hands after gardening especially before eating.
- Keep a hand sterilizing gel in the potting shed if clean water is not available.

Resources

- [Gardening Safety](#), American Society for Surgery of the Hand
- [Minimising health risks in the garden](#), Royal Horticultural Society
- [Lawn and Safety Tips - CPSC Urges Care with Springtime Chores](#), Consumer Product Safety Commission