

Gardening Safety Tips

Tips for gardening safely through the seasons for years to come.

By Michelle Moore

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Recently at the International Master Gardener's Conference a speaker, Dr. Dave Lipschitz addressed the attendees with his talk: Gardening: A path to a long and independent life. He mentioned that statistically, only 1 in 2 people above the age of 85 are able to live independently and that in the next 20 years the number of people 85 and above will triple. He said that gardening was an important component of staying healthy. Not only does gardening provide a spiritual connection, there is a link to healthy eating and the exercise component, which is the key to longevity.

I used to snicker as a kid when my mother would tell me that gardening was good exercise. I didn't understand how a leisure activity could be considered exercise. Where was the sweat? Where was the heavy lifting? Well, that was before my mother or I owned a greenhouse and before container gardening became a mainstay. I have newfound respect for the gardeners of the world; especially those who own a greenhouse.

Having a greenhouse is like going to a buffet where eyes are often larger than the stomach. With a greenhouse it just takes longer to realize your plate is full. Seeds look so tiny and unassuming. Who would know that when planted and given a happy home, they grow into unruly giants? When starts are in need of transplanting or a permanent home in the garden is when the work out begins. Those seedlings grow and grow. Pretty soon you have enough planting to keep you busy for weeks.

When we garden in a greenhouse we take a lot for granted; most obviously a pleasant environment. It doesn't rain in a greenhouse unless you want it to, and the temperature is usually more pleasant than outdoors. In early summer, transitioning from greenhouse gardening to gardening outdoors involves more changes than the weather. If you've been gardening in your greenhouse through the winter or even just this spring, you may not realize that you too may need a slight transition back to outdoor gardening. Just as you place your greenhouse plants in a protected area to harden them off before planting; it's not a bad idea for people to approach the change in the same way.

Greenhouse gardeners don't miss a beat when the weather turns cold in the fall. They quickly adapt to a new environment. Come summer, it's easy to forget that a greenhouse offered more than protection from the cold. There are doors to keep many of the biting and stinging insects out. There is covering to protect you from the sun's UV rays. The floor is even and stable, no rocks to twist ankles or to trip on. Benches prevent stooping and bending for planting or caring for over winter guests. Scooping replaces digging. Fans exhaust the hot air when it gets too warm. Weeding consists of plucking out unwanted residents rather than excavating them. Plants start as small seeds rather than large pots. The unassuming greenhouse gardener doesn't realize a transition awaits them.

Dr. Lipschitz did not mention that roughly 400,000 people visit the emergency room each year for gardening related injuries or that it's estimated that one in five DIY injuries are garden related. Most of these injuries are preventable. If you've transplanted the equivalent of a small nursery, perhaps you've experienced common gardening injuries; strained muscles, sunburn, heat stroke, or repetitive stress and fatigue. Many of these injuries are avoidable with a few precautions. First of all, when transitioning to the garden from the greenhouse, give yourself a little time to ease back into the outdoor routine. Before starting any intensive work, go for a five minute walk to get the blood flowing. Next, do some light stretching but don't push yourself when your muscles are cold, just do light stretching to limber up. Secondly, don't expect to get everything done in one or two sessions. Give your muscles time to adjust to new positions and stresses.

Proper body mechanics is important to maintaining an injury free summer. If you've been growing in your greenhouse, chances are you're used to working on benches. It's a whole new story when you start to work at ground level. Maintaining a strong core will go a long way to keeping the rest of your body healthy. When lifting your arms, legs or engaging your back, keeping your stomach muscles engaged will protect the back muscles. Many of us were told to "suck in your stomach"; however, it's more effective to stick your stomach out slightly. Think about your reflexes as someone punches you in the gut. That constriction in your stomach is the position you want to maintain. If you are lifting anything or stretching your body to reach a particular place, be mindful of your core muscles.

Keeping your stomach tight will protect your back which is prone to injury. When lifting heavy objects, lift with your legs and make sure to keep the object close to your body. If you are moving heavy containers into or out of the greenhouse, get some help. The PotLifter is an inexpensive tool that distributes the weight evenly making awkward loads easy to move with the help of someone else.

Using the proper tools will also go along way in preventing injuries. Raised beds provide an excellent environment for plants and reduce much of the bending and stooping of a traditional garden. If you are working at ground level for long periods of time, use a kneeling pad, knee pads or a garden rocker to elevate stress on your lower back. New ergonomic and light-weight Radius tools reduce repetitive stress injuries while digging, weeding and transplanting. By keeping your wrist in a neutral position, these new tools help you get the job done with a relaxed and natural grip. Bionic gloves are also a wonderful tool in the garden. Reinforcement pads in the fingers make gripping easy while reducing strain and pressure points on your hands.

In summer we strive to keep our gardens well fed and pest free. It is also when we see a dramatic rise in chemical injuries. Labels on pesticides, fertilizers and garden products are not just instructions, they are a legal contract. Following the directions on packaging is the only way to ensure your safety, so read labels carefully. Also keep chemicals out of reach of children. Summer is the perfect time to clean and disinfect your greenhouse. Before you use chemicals or cleaners to disinfect your greenhouse, check with the manufacturer to determine what products are safe to use on your greenhouse covering.

Some cleaning chemicals react with various materials and may produce hazardous gasses when applied to the wrong surface. Also keep body mechanics in mind when cleaning your greenhouse. Don't forget to bend at the knee and be careful to keep your back in a neutral position (the lower back muscles are not engaged) when cleaning the lower portions of the structure.

Regardless of how you use your greenhouse, you'll have plenty to do all year round. Use these safety tips and you'll enjoy the rewarding and relaxing benefits of gardening for the seasons and for many happy years to come.

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