

## Features

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# Protecting the Customer ... And Employees ... And You

*Zachery Bruce*

Just how safe is your garden center? Are you aware of potential hazards to be on the lookout for? Do you perform regular inspections of your garden center with the focus on safety and hazard identification/elimination? Are your employees properly trained to operate all equipment and machinery? Do you have a safety team to help the garden center be a safe place for all who enter?

The last thing any business owner wants to occur at his or her garden center is an accident where an employee or customer is severely injured or worse. While I find this to be true a statement, I also see many potential hazards that routinely cause severe accidents and injuries at garden centers. The two most common types of accidents that can potentially cause injuries include slips, trips and falls, and unsafe lifting. Other common accidents and injuries within the garden center setting include the use of machinery and equipment.

## Slips/Trips/Falls

Housekeeping is one of the most important aspects to maintaining a safe garden center. Not only can good housekeeping practices prevent injuries, but it can also help prevent devastating fires. While everyone thinks about the garden hose and watering wand, there are some additional common hazards that seem to be overlooked. They include:

- **Algae**—In addition to creating a very slippery walking surface, this condition typically leads to higher liability claims in the event of a slip/fall injury.



- **Not posting Slip, Trip, Fall Signs**—Make sure to warn customers and employees of wet surfaces that may be slippery.

- **Ladders: Unsafe condition & lack of training**—Using unsafe ladders and/or employees not being trained properly in ladder safety is the cause of many costly injuries within our industry.

- **Low-lying objects in aisles and around corners**—A small

plant or display item left in the walkway or around a corner is easy for a customer or employee to miss when walking through the garden center.

## Safe Lifting Practices

Make sure all employees are trained in proper lifting techniques and that they're following their training. Supervisors should be on the lookout for improper lifting and provide additional guidance when necessary. Here are some additional safe-lifting tips:

- Train your employees to use a mechanical lifting device whenever possible (Dolly, pot lifter, pallet jack, forklift, etc.).
- Use a cart when moving objects over a long distance, even if it's just one item.
- Set a maximum safe-lifting limit before a team lift is required.
- Don't allow employees to twist their back when lifting. Twisting the back is notorious for causing a herniated disk.
- Have an accurate job description for all positions and make sure employees can perform the job.
- Perform a pre-employment physical with all prospective garden center workers.



## Machinery Hazards

The conveyor belt shown here has two guarding issues. The first is the belt has a nip point where it turns around the pulley and the second is that the spindle sticks out too far from the side of the conveyor. I've seen claims where an employee has accidentally placed their finger under the belt and it was amputated when it turned around the pulley. The spindle on the side of the conveyor can't extend more than half of its diameter before it's required to be guarded. Inspect all machinery, looking for moving parts that employees could be caught in or hit by. Install proper guards to prevent injuries. I commonly hear, "This is how the machinery was manufactured." Unfortunately, equipment is manufactured without the proper guards. It's the employer's responsibility to ensure all equipment is properly guarded for their application.

Another hazard that many garden centers don't recognize occurs when a piece of machinery requires maintenance or has a jam that needs to be cleared. I have seen too many injuries occur when a piece of machinery accidentally or unexpectedly starts-up when someone is working on the equipment. This can easily lead to injuries causing broken bones and severed limbs. All equipment within the facility should have proper lockout/tagout procedures in place and only trained and authorized employees should be involved in performing maintenance or clearing a jam.

## Mobile Equipment

Many garden centers have mobile equipment available to assist employees in performing their work safely. This equipment can be extremely helpful in reducing the amount of manual labor that's required, but is also the cause of many injuries. Some types of equipment include: forklifts, skid steers, loaders, tractors, scissor lifts, etc.

It's extremely important that all equipment operators receive proper training in the safe operation of all equipment they use. I always recommend the same type of training that's required to be performed for a forklift, which includes: a classroom safety session, practical training and a hands-on evaluation. Until formal training specific to your facility has been performed, employees shouldn't be allowed to operate the equipment.



Employees should never be permitted to be raised by a piece of equipment unless it was designed to do so by the manufacturer. Too many accidents occur when an employee falls from the equipment and is seriously injured.

## Stay Vigilant

It's important for garden centers to address safety at their facility to ensure that their employees and customers remain safe during the day-to-day operations of the company. It's especially important to remain vigilant in your safety efforts during the busiest months of the year, when the chances of an accident/injury rise due to the increase in employees and customers visiting the garden center. Garden centers must have applicable safety programs in place and perform routine safety inspections of their facility. It's important that employees receive the proper training to perform their jobs safely. One of the best ways that I find for garden centers to provide routine training to their employees is to perform a weekly tailgate ("toolbox talk") safety training session on applicable issues throughout the year. Lastly, create a safety team that meets regularly to discuss safety-related issues that come up throughout the year. **GP**

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