

Just How Safe Is Your Garden Center?

by Andrew J. Mauschbaugh

During the recent, busy spring planting season, a garden center employee was attempting to clean the potting machine. Unfortunately, the new employee had not been trained on cleaning procedures for the machine, and it was not properly locked out for cleaning. The machine was actually *running* while the employee was trying to clean it, and he sustained multiple, open fractures to his hand as a result.

Garden center owners pay a high price in insurance claims from an accident like this, but more importantly, it could cost an employee a limb or even their life in some cases – an incalculable price to pay for a preventable accident.

Could this type of accident occur at your garden center? Even an organized garden center with safety conscious employees can be susceptible to accidents. During this busy season, the number of employees working at a garden center will increase two-fold and more. This increase in employees as well as customers can jeopardize safety and increase the possibility of accidents.

Some of the most common causes of accidents in garden centers include slips/trips/falls, fires, boilers, improperly guarded machinery or equipment, and chemical and electrical hazards.

Many garden center owners are unaware that the cost of each accident often exceeds the actual cost of the insurance claim. While the direct medical, lost wages, and disability costs are covered by the insurance company, other costs associated with the claim, such as lost productivity, re-training and a higher work comp experience modifier, are incurred by the business.

When assessing the safety of your garden center, consider the following risk areas.

Housekeeping

Housekeeping issues are the source of many slip/trip/fall accidents. Boxes and other items should be stacked neatly on shelves, so there is no risk they will fall or present an obstacle for employees or customers. All aisles and walkways should be clear of any clutter or debris that could cause a fall – this includes wooden pallets from delivery of goods. All areas should be well organized, and proper lighting is essential.

External housekeeping is as important as internal housekeeping. Hoses should not be left lying across paths or walkways or coiled up on the ground, where people can easily trip over them. Consider using an auto-recoil system. Outdoor walking surfaces should be relatively flat with no obstacles. Changes in elevation should be clearly marked, and four or more stairs require a handrail for safety. If an area is wet, post a hazard sign to avoid slips and falls.

Fire Hazards

Fire is one of the most common causes of catastrophic property loss, so fire safety is of utmost importance. All flammable liquids should be stored in NFPA cabinets. Wooden pallets, which are extremely flammable, should be stored at least 30 feet away from the outside of exposed buildings. Heaters should be specifically designed for greenhouse use. Fire extinguishers should be mounted and clearly labeled in key areas throughout the garden center and should be self-inspected monthly.

One special area of concern is the use of energy curtains in greenhouses. Energy curtains made of Polyethylene/Aluminum, in particular, have a very high flammability danger, burning 26 times hotter than Polyester/Aluminum curtains. Safer energy curtains are available that limit curtain-to-curtain spread of fire by using a firebreak section along both edges of each curtain.

Energy curtains require at least 24 inches of clearance from any ignition source. Some other precautions you can take include correcting potential wiring problems, placing proper fire-fighting equipment in each structure (garden hoses are NOT adequate), installing and maintaining smoke alarms in all buildings, and training employees about the fire risks associated with energy curtains and how to deal with them in the event of a fire.

Boilers

All boilers should be inspected annually by a licensed inspector, and boiler rooms should be kept clean and orderly at all times. Any combustibles must be stored at least 36 inches away from a boiler. Check regularly for clogged tubes, which can explode.

Machine Guarding

Effectively guarding machinery and training employees on proper use and cleaning can prevent the loss of life or limb. Potting machines, grinders, table saws and other machinery with blades or dangerous moving parts should have shields or guards on them for protection when not in use, and employees should be given clear instructions and training on operating and maintaining all machinery.

Chemicals

Garden centers use many harmful chemicals that can cause illness or injury if safety precautions are not in place. Hazardous chemicals should be stored in cabinets that are locked and labeled, and all containers should be clearly marked with contents. A shower and eye wash station should be immediately available on site in case of contact with chemicals. Areas where hazardous chemicals are used should be well ventilated and include a fan to

Continued on page 6



Just How Safe Is Your Garden Center?

Continued from page 5

remove any smell or chemical dust. Employees handling chemicals should wear proper face or eye protection to avoid injury.

Electrical Hazards

Electrical hazards in a garden center can cause fires or serious injury, so safety measures should be taken and inspected regularly. All breaker boxes must have tight-fitting covers, and all outlets should be covered. Make sure there is proper wiring that meets the National Electric Code. Plants, products, and other items should be kept at least 3 feet away from electrical panels. Inside the panels, place “dummy” breakers in open breaker slots. Ground prongs are there for a reason – don’t bypass them. Ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) should be used in all wet areas. Use UL-listed cord protectors over walkways.

OSHA Guidelines

Garden centers fall under OSHA Standard Industrial Classification 078 and 5261. In 2004, there were 142 OSHA inspections of garden centers and 360 citations issued, resulting in \$243,891 in penalties. OSHA’s top 10 citations for garden centers were:

1. Personal protective equipment (for eyes, face, head, extremities, etc.)
2. Hazard communication (proper labeling/notification of hazardous chemicals)
3. Eye/face protection (protective goggles or masks)
4. Control of hazardous energy (service/maintenance of machines)
5. Flammable/combustible liquids (proper storage)
6. Electrical wiring (continuity of electrical raceways and enclosures)
7. Powered industrial trucks (safety of forklifts, tractors, hand trucks, etc.)
8. Abrasive wheel (safety guards required)
9. Respiratory protection
10. Machine guarding

In Hortica’s experience with garden centers, we have found that many are not conducting regular safety inspections of their operations. Reasons for this vary, but the most frequent reason expressed is the garden center owner or manager is “too busy.” Every garden center is at risk for accidents. A self-inspection safety program is a good way to detect unsafe conditions that can lead to accidents.

Ask yourself if there are conditions present in your center that could cause serious injury. A self-inspection safety program is helpful in identifying problem areas that need correction and should be conducted on a regular basis.

A well-planned safety program helps detect hazards before an accident occurs, which will also increase operating efficiency.

Components for a Self-Inspection Safety Program

An employee, manager, or garden center owner can conduct the safety inspection. Ideally, a walk-through inspection should be completed at minimum on a monthly basis, when there is a change in employees or operations, and following the installation of new equipment. A checklist should be developed and should include items specific to your operation. Be aware of and pay attention to both unsafe conditions and unsafe acts that contribute to accidents. After each inspection, an appointed employee will need to be responsible for reviewing the reports and ensuring corrective actions are taken, if necessary.

When developing your checklist, be sure to include all areas of your operation. The completion of safety inspection should take less than 30 minutes and can literally save you hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars.

Andrew J. Mauschbaugh
Hortica
1 Horticultural Lane
Edwardsville, IL 62025
800-851-7740
800-233-3642
AMauschbaugh@hortica-insurance.com
www.hortica-insurance.com.

