

Gardening can be hazardous

Home & Garden

Springtime means gardening time, and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission cautions that some 125,500 consumers will wind up in hospital emergency rooms nationwide as a result of accidents associated with home yard and garden equipment.

Heading the list of products involved with serious injuries and deaths are power lawn mowers, riding mowers and garden tractors. There are now some 45 million power mowers in use by American families. Annually, they are associated with 60,500 injuries (that require hospital emergency room care - serious cuts, punctures, fractures, amputations, loss of sight, and other permanent disabilities).

The greatest percentage of power lawnmower accidents is attributed to rotary power mowers.

The hazards of blade tips that move at over 200 miles per hour and can hurl projectiles into a neighboring yard with deadly velocity as well as several reports of product defects involving more than 47,000 rotary power mowers and almost 18,000 garden tractors have placed this product among the first selected by the commission for the development of mandatory safety standards.

In-depth investigations of accidents over the past few years reveal two major hazard patterns associated with rotary power mowers:

1. Direct contact with moving blades - a clump of grass clogged in the discharge chute has lured many a gardener to pain and misfortune as

has a quick adjustment while the rotor is on. A foot slipping under the mower while moving on an incline or in tall grass and encountering an obstacle such as a rock has accounted for numerous injuries.

2. Propelled objects - operators, bystanders, children, and neighbors nearby have been severely injured by small pieces of wire, small rocks, stones, and bits of wood and metal shot from discharge chutes.

Many accidents could be averted by careful attention to instruction manuals, proper maintenance and the use of common sense. The safety commission offers this safety checklist as a reminder of operators of power mowers:

- Wear sturdy shoes.
- Never mow when tired or in a hurry.
- Rake the lawn carefully prior to mowing to remove any debris.
- Be sure that others are out of the area before starting.
- Never remove any of the safety guards and shields that should be attached to the mower.
- Use caution when starting the mower. Do not stand in a direct line with the discharge chute.
- Never leave the mower running and unattended.

• Never refuel the mower while it is running or hot. Store gasoline in a safety container away from living areas.

• Never tip or lift the mower when it is running.

• Turn the mower off and make sure the blades have stopped rotating before clearing the discharge chute. Disconnect the spark plug before further maintenance or repairs.

• Wear safety glasses to protect eyes.

• Never permit children to use a mower and supervise inexperienced operators very carefully.

Operators of electric mowers should use brightly colored cords to avoid accidentally severing them. Make certain the machine is grounded and that the extension cord used is the proper gauge. Never move in wet grass.

Slopes are a major hazard for riding mowers. Operators of riding mowers and garden tractors have been injured and killed when the mower overturns or when the driver or extra rider, sometimes a child, falls off.

Children also have been severely injured when a careless operator goes into reverse without looking behind first.

Power hedge trimmers - both single and double edge - also are convenient but potentially dangerous garden aides. An estimated 8,400 persons required emergency room care last year for injuries that included severe cuts and amputations.

Many gardeners find it necessary to remove the left hand from the trimmer to hold branches away from the cutting blade or to direct branches into the cutting blade and inadvertently injure themselves.

Trimmers often are heavy and unwieldy, and the removal of end hand can limit control and direction. Fatigue, hand cramps, and standing on a chair or box while trimming have all contributed to some reported accidents.

In several cases, the cord was cited as another contributing cause. The cord can limit direction and distance, and accident victims have reported they were distracted while pulling the cord or while trying to keep the cord from being cut.

Consumers who use hedge trimmers or similar equipment should observe the following tips:

- Read instructions. When renting a trimmer, be sure to receive thorough operating instructions and safety guidelines.
- Don't hurry.
- Keep hands out of the way.
- Use specially designed extension cord connectors so the cord will not

pull out when tension is applied. A belt hook to keep the cord away from the blades also would be a good idea.

When purchasing a trimmer, seek one that is lightweight, easy to maneuver, and incorporates safe design features. Check to see that the position of the forward grip handle is located above and away from the cutting blade. Look for a trimmer with a pressure-sensitive switch that cuts the power immediately when the pressure is released.

For additional information or to report a hazardous product or a product-related injury, call the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission toll-free hot line (800) 638-2666.

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