

Garden Good Guys – Hand Safety

By Nanette Londeree

“Ooouuccchhhh, another nasty thorn!” exclaims the intrepid gardener. “Right through these flimsy gloves!” Boy, do I know this story well.....it’s too wet out to wear my hefty hand protection so I opt for my lighter-weight, allegedly waterproof gloves. Ripping out some volunteer blackberries and starting on my rose pruning with inadequate hand protection got me right where I didn’t want to be – at the doctor’s office with a walloping hand infection. While a little stick from those prickles may seem to be just another gardening challenge, it can develop into something pretty nasty, and potentially difficult to treat.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), emergency rooms treat more than 400,000 outdoor garden-tool-related accidents each year. “While protection and safety is important in everyday life, proper hand care is particularly important in the garden,” says David M. Lichtman, MD, American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH) Vice President and chairman of the ASSH public awareness committee, “the key to keeping your hands safe and in good condition is common sense.”

Punctures to the hand are of primary concern; they can be from wood, metal, glass, or plastic resulting in splinters that may cause irritation and infection if not removed. That prick from a rose thorn can result in a malady called rose picker’s or rose thorn’s disease. Caused by the yeasty fungus *Sophorix shenckii* (that is also found on sphagnum moss and hay), it produces redness, swelling and open weeping ulcerations along the puncture site, and if untreated, can lead to an infection that can take weeks to clear up, or worse, travel to the lymphatic system where it spreads throughout the body. If you get jabbed with a thorn, clean the area completely and remove any thorn remains embedded in the skin. If you observe signs of infection (increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness, red streaks leading from the wound, swollen lymph nodes in your neck, armpits, or groin, or fever), seek medical attention.

To generally protect your hands while working in the garden, gloves - appropriate for the task - are most important. Gloves provide a barrier from soil, splinters, pricks, cuts and abrasions, insect and spider bites, poison oak and other skin irritants. They keep skin dry, prevent sunburn and fingernail damage and reduce blistering. There are plenty of types to choose from - *cotton gloves* are comfortable, inexpensive and washable, but offer no protection from water, stickers and thorns. *Leather gloves* provide protection from thorns, but still absorb water and don’t “breathe.” *Rubber gloves* will keep your hands dry and are great for working in wet or muddy situations, but also don’t breathe well.

Spandex/Lyrca composite gloves are snug-fitting, impervious to water and durable, but may not be an adequate barrier for splinters and thorns. *Nitrile gloves* allow for great dexterity, are strong and more puncture-resistant than rubber; those with a knit material on the back allow for air circulation. Be sure that gloves fit well, that they’re nice and snug. Choose gloves with long wrist protectors (gauntlets) for pruning plants with prickles and thorns. And fingerless gloves can be great for doing detailed work such as transplanting seedlings.



Some additional tips for protecting your hands:

- Use the right tool for the job to reduce unnecessary hand strain; choose tools with form-fitting handles only if they fit your hand perfectly to prevent pain, soreness, and calluses from incorrect fit.
- Use wide handled tools to protect the smaller joints in your hands, and tools with thicker and padded handles. Avoid constant, repetitive or awkward gripping of tools or awkward motions.
- Manage prolonged repetitive motions such as digging, raking, trimming hedges, pruning or planting by varying or rotating tasks with brief in-between rests, so that the same muscles are not used repeatedly.
- Use proper ergonomic posture, especially 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.
- Watch out for buried, sharp objects when digging in unfamiliar or new areas; they can cause tendon lacerations or punctures.

So, if you want to protect your hands, don't follow my example; you'll get to skip the shot of antibiotics in the rump, oral drugs for ten days, and limited use of your hands!