Editor's note: PASS ON EACH ISSUE OF THIS NEWSLETTER TO EVERYONE WITH SAFETY RESPONSIBILITIES AT YOUR COMPANY.

Using Manual Pruning Tools

Note: This newsletter contains tips for pruning plants and small trees from ground level. Click here for information about pruning larger trees.

Key Points
- Spring is the time for pruning many plants, and manual tools, such as hand pruners (also called pruning shears), loppers, and pruning saws help landscaping crews complete this task quickly and efficiently.
- Despite—or perhaps partially because of—their everyday nature, these tools have the potential to cause severe injuries. Familiarity can lead to improper use and poor maintenance, thus creating hazards. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, approximately 27,000 people receive hospital treatment for pruning injuries each year. Injuries are typically to the fingers and involve lacerations.
- Cuts and hand injuries are primary hazards for workers involved in lawn and landscape maintenance and planting, according to federal OSHA. The agency’s Office of Statistical Analysis reports that cuts, lacerations, and punctures are the second most common type of injury in our industry, accounting for 17 percent of those reported annually.
- Use of pruning tools also can contribute to ergonomic and repetitive-stress injuries.
- When employees are properly trained and stay mindful of dangers, however, risks posed by pruning tools are significantly lessened.

Employers’ and Supervisors’ Checklist
- ✓ Comply with federal, state, and local regulations for employee use of hand tools. See federal OSHA standards at the agency’s Hand and Power Tools Safety and Health Topics Page.
- ✓ Remember that per federal OSHA, you are responsible for the safe condition of tools and equipment employees use. Train workers to inspect tools before use and to bring damaged, over-worn or rusted tools to the attention of a supervisor. Tag these tools “Do Not Use.”
- ✓ Purchase tools that fit the hand comfortably, have soft grips, and are as lightweight as possible. Avoid buying pruning tools that cause employees to work in awkward positions or with unnecessary strain on their wrists, arms, shoulders, or back.
- ✓ Teach employees to recognize hazards caused by faulty or improperly used pruning tools.
- ✓ Train workers in the proper operation and handling of each pruning tool they will be required to use. Make sure they know how to choose the right pruning tool for the job.
- ✓ Provide employees with and ensure they wear the appropriate personal protective equipment. For pruning tasks, this usually includes face shields or safety glasses with side shields, steel-toed boots, hard hats, and gloves. Consider purchasing metal-mesh gloves to better protect workers from cuts and abrasions.
- ✓ Teach workers to prune branches with the safety of the property owner or public in mind. Low-hanging or damaged branches can cause injuries and/or property damage. Removing branches that obstruct walkways or rest on personal property can prevent potentially hazardous situations.
- ✓ When employees use pole pruners, make sure they maintain OSHA-established minimum working distances from energized electric lines and conductors as established by 29 CFR 1910.268(q)(2)(iv).
When work must be performed within the electric-line minimum distances set by OSHA, notify the utility company. The company will work with you to determine the best option for protecting workers. Options include de-energizing and grounding the lines and covering them with insulating hoses or blankets.

Ensure that trained and experienced line-clearance tree trimmers do all tree trimming or removal work within 10 feet of a power line.

Rotate employees among tasks and allow rest periods, including micro-breaks; i.e., 20–30-second pauses in which workers stop performing tasks and stretch. Encourage crew members to do this about every 15 minutes, especially if their tasks are repetitive, as is often the case with pruning.

Know that many injuries can be avoided with proper maintenance and storage of pruning tools. Dull, sticky tools can lead to cuts and other injuries.

Teach employees to sharpen, clean, and otherwise maintain pruning tools according to their manufacturers’ recommendations. Also, instruct them in disinfecting pruning tools to avoid spreading plant diseases and fungi.

Provide a clean, dry place for storing tools.

Employee Dos and Don’ts

Do:

- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment, including a face shield or safety glasses with side shields, sturdy, steel-toed boots (to help you maintain balance as well as protect your feet), a hard hat, gloves, long-sleeved shirt, and thick pants.
- Choose the right tool for the job. If you don’t, you can damage the tool and the plant and injure yourself. In general, hand pruners or pruning shears are appropriate for stems up to finger width, loppers are for thumb-sized material, and pruning saws are needed for larger branches.
- Before use, inspect pruning tools to determine if they are functioning properly.
- Ensure all moveable joints are lubricated and blades are adequately sharpened. Dull tools are more hazardous than sharp ones because they require excessive pressure. Dull tools also make ragged cuts on plants. This could lead to bark tearing and stem damage that could leave the plant susceptible to disease.
- Check tools for wear and metal fatigue and make sure bolts, nuts, and screws are tight.
- Remove damaged or defective tools from service. Tag them “Do Not Use” and notify a supervisor.
- Inspect the work area for signs of bees, wasps, or other potential animal hazards.
- Maintain a safe working distance from other people and direct tools away from other employees working in close proximity.
- Stay alert and keep potential hazards in mind.
- Grip tools firmly and securely so they do not slip.
- As with any sharp tool, cut away from yourself.
- Always know the location of your hands and fingers before making a cut.
- Let the cutting surface do the work. When extra effort is needed to make the cut, sharpen or adjust blades. Alert a supervisor if worn-out parts need to be replaced.
- Give an audible warning, such as “timber,” before a branch falls.
- Take frequent breaks when performing repetitive tasks. Do not overtire yourself.
- Stretch during scheduled breaks and during micro-breaks; i.e., 20–30-second pauses in which you stop performing tasks.
- Vary your body position while doing repetitive work.
- Carry pruning tools with sharp ends pointed down and use a tool belt when appropriate. Be sure your tool belt isn’t too heavy as it could strain your lower back and hips. Carry only essential tools.
- Keep tools where they belong. Never leave them on an overhead surface where they could fall on someone or on the ground or floor where they could trip someone.
- At the end of the day’s work, wipe the pruning blade clean with a dry cloth and lubricate the movable handle shaft and spring. Disinfect blades per your company’s instructions.
Don’t:

- Use any tool until you have been trained to do so and feel comfortable with your understanding of the training, which should include information on potential hazards and safety precautions. You also can ask your supervisor for the manufacturer-provided pruning tool brochure or manual and review instructions for use and safety procedures.
- Use pruning tools while standing in an area where you can’t keep secure footing and balance.
- Hold your body in awkward positions when using pruning tools. Keep your body at a comfortable angle to the work. Adjust the position of the tool to minimize bending your wrist or body, reaching, or twisting.
- Attempt to cut branches bigger than the pruning tool was designed to cut.
- Remove, disable, or bypass a blade guard or other safety device. Immediately report any missing or broken safety devices to your supervisor.
- Prune trees or branches within 10 feet of power lines. If this needs to be done, alert a supervisor. Trained and experienced line-clearance tree trimmers must do this work.
- Violate OSHA electric line minimum working distances when using pole pruners. (See chart here for distances.)
- Use metal pole pruners anywhere near electric lines or conductors.
- Carry sharp tools in a pocket.