



Electric Safety in Your Yard: Look Up, Look Out and Live!

By Charles Basham

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Electric safety tips in a gardening article? Really?

Yes, really! Electric safety is relevant to every home gardener. And, because May is National Electric Safety Month, this a perfect time to review the basics of electric safety before you step outdoors for a serious day of fresh air, weed pulling and yard work.

Many of our daily activities involve the use of electricity. Its power provides a tremendous amount of comfort and convenience. But, if electricity isn't handled properly, it can be a swift, merciless killer. According to the Electric Safety Foundation International every year thousands of children and adults are critically injured, burned and electrocuted from electrical hazards encountered in their home, yard and at work.

A typical outdoor electrical accident might occur when a person touches a frayed extension cord while operating an electric weed eater on wet grass. That simple mistake leaves no room for forgiveness. At the speed of light electricity will automatically find the easiest path to the ground. Frequently that deadly path is the human body. As the electricity courses through the body it wreaks horrible damage to tissues, organs and the nerve system. Even a simple electric shock coming from a home wall socket can instantly stop a heart!

The first step to not being injured is knowing that you can be injured. When you think about it, our work behavior is often torn between competing goals -- cost, time, convenience and efficiency versus personal safety. These pressures ultimately influence our behavioral decision. So, sometimes we choose to take short cuts and chances. We ignore obvious warning signs. We get distracted or can't be bothered. We even bargain with ourselves: "I'll do it just this one time." And that's when accidents happen!

Safety is a choice -- and a lot of common sense. Before your yard work begins think about all the tasks involved and assess the work area for hazards and safety issues. Start by looking up. Locate the power lines and make a note of where they are -- as well as where they are not. And point them out to everyone helping you. It's imperative that you always assume all overhead wires are energized and dangerous. Keep in mind that power lines DO NOT have a protective covering. Even that heavily insulated bundle of wires coming down from the power pole to the home can be dangerous and should never be touched.

When using tools that extend above your head, like a ladder or tree saw, remember the "ten foot rule." Never let those tools, or any part of your body, get closer than ten feet from an overhead wire. Also make sure that if you lose your grip on a long handled tool that it cannot fall into a wire.

Before using outdoor electrical tools and extension cords, inspect them for damage to the insulation, plugs and wiring. If you find a problem, replace the tool or take it to a qualified professional for repair. And always store your electric tools indoors to protect them from moisture and excessive heat.

Water and electricity are a deadly combination. So never use electric tools when it's wet outside. Even light morning dew is enough to cause an accident. For added protection make sure all your outdoor electric tools are plugged into an electrical outlet equipped with a Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI).

A GFCI will prevent a deadly shock by instantly and automatically shutting off power to the circuit if it detects a dangerous electrical problem. The National Electrical Code requires that GFCIs be used in all outlets in kitchens, bathrooms, garages and outdoors.

If your garden work includes digging, whether it's to plant a shrub or bury an irrigation pipe, are you sure the dig site is free of buried utility lines? Electricity wires, gas lines, water pipes and communication cables are buried everywhere in our communities. To make sure you don't dig in to one, simply call 8-1-1 at least two days before your work begins. An operator will arrange for a utility representative to come to your home and locate any buried utility lines. It's a free service to you and it can prevent all sorts of injuries and headaches.

There are two final and extremely important electric safety tips you need to remember. First, never touch or even go near a downed power line. It may be energized and deadly even if it's sitting peacefully on the ground. And second, never touch someone who has come in contact with a power line. The victim may still be in contact with the electrical source and if you touch the victim you can also be hurt. Call 911 immediately and keep others far away. Only a utility worker is qualified to determine when and if this type of situation becomes safe.

For additional electrical safety information, go to the web site of your local electric utility or the Electric Safety Foundation International.

Water Saving Information: To help you with our state's on-going water conservation efforts the Master Gardener organization, through the UC system, has compiled several helpful web-based tips regarding home gardening and home irrigation:

http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Drought/Drought_Gardening_Tips/

About the Author

Before retirement and becoming a Master Gardener in El Dorado County, Charles Basham was the manager of public safety for one of the largest electric utilities in the world. He has more than 30 years of experience in the field of electrical safety.

There is no public gardening class this weekend, May 10, 2014.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC Master Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.