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FEATURES

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Re-check Your Checklist

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In my years as a safety consultant, I've had the privilege of stepping inside hundreds of greenhouses across the country, from regional family-run operations to sprawling, high-tech facilities. The most successful greenhouses all share one quality: an unwavering commitment to safety.

My job is to guide our customers through potential hazards. We discuss risk scenarios, navigate the ever-changing regulatory landscape and identify gaps in safety programs. My goal is to help growers of all sizes enhance safety within their business. This article is a reflection of those conversations.

I've gathered the most common risks I see on a daily basis and paired them with reminders to help you apply strategies within your own greenhouse.

Put your people first

I always remind growers that safety starts at the top and involves every member of the team. It's not just about policies and procedures; it's about building a culture where safety is a core value. Here's how to translate that philosophy into action:

1. Define your supervisors' safety responsibilities. Supervisors act as the backbone of any successful safety program. They're the bridge between management and employees, with the most direct influence on daily work practices and conditions. Here are supervisors' duties to help enhance safety:

- Explain safety hazards and controls when assigning workers to specific jobs. Select qualified employees who've been appropriately trained.
- Provide well-maintained tools and personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Supervise all hazardous work that demands special training.
- Inspect work areas to ensure workers follow good housekeeping practices.
- Observe work procedures to detect and correct unsafe practices and conditions.
- Investigate and report all accidents—including near-misses—that occur.
- Ensure injured workers receive immediate medical attention. Identify modified-duty jobs designed to help them return to work based on limitations and capabilities.

2. Hire for safe workers. I always emphasize that building a safer business starts from the very beginning—

during the hiring process. Craft job descriptions that emphasize the importance of safety-conscious employees. Go beyond skills and experiences during the interview process. Ask questions that give you a sense about their attitudes and commitment toward safety.

When you're ready to make a hire, work with your legal or human resources team to set up a background-check process, noting that laws vary by state. You should also take the time to review references, and when applicable, past driving records.

3. Train and educate throughout the year. Safety doesn't stop after you hire your employees. Think about the nature of your own work. You wouldn't simply plant seeds and walk away. Your crops require consistent care and attention to grow. The same rule applies to both your employees and maintaining a safe business.

Set a regular cadence to host safety trainings throughout the year. Here are some topics to consider:

- *Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP)*: An IIPP acts as your greenhouse's safety roadmap. It's a documented program that outlines how you'll identify and mitigate potential hazards. Regularly revisiting your plan helps ensure everyone—from seasoned veterans to new hires—understands their roles.

- *Lockout/Tagout (LOTO)*: Your team works around equipment every day; therefore, they need to be trained on how to prevent unintentional restarts during maintenance or repair work to keep everyone safe.

- *Heat stress:* Given the nature of horticultural work, train your team on how to identify the signs and symptoms of heat illness, including proper hydration practices and scheduled breaks.

- *Pesticide handling:* Protecting your plants with pesticides also requires protecting employees. Share reminders about PPE use, storage protocols and application techniques. Be sure to comply with the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Worker Protection Standard (WPS) when using pesticides that contain "Agricultural Use" on the label.

- *Driving:* Don't assume employees know how to drive safely just because they have a valid driver's license. Any employee that drives for your business should have training on topics like defensive driving techniques, distracted driving avoidance, safe following distances and vehicle inspections. Earlier, I mentioned checking driving records as a part of your hiring process. In fact, when applicable, you should also make reviewing driving records a regular habit, even for your long-standing employees. If you find concerns, address them.

- *Cybersecurity:* Not all hazards are physical. Help your employees understand how to identify phishing attempts and protect sensitive company information.

4. Adopt an accident review and near-miss program. Preventing accidents should always remain the top priority, but sometimes, your business may experience an unexpected incident. I'm a strong advocate for adopting a formal accident review program. This should go beyond documenting incidents. It helps you understand the root cause of accidents and near misses (incidents that could have caused an accident or injury), which can help you spot potential gaps in your safety protocols and pinpoint areas to improve.

5. Perform routine internal safety inspections. Don't wait until there's an accident to perform a safety inspection or review a job procedure. Stay proactive by conducting regular inspections and a job hazard analysis (JHA) to help you identify and correct hazards before an accident. Aim for monthly or quarterly safety inspections depending on the size of your organization and review JHAs at least annually.



Pictured: Don't wait until there's an accident to perform a safety inspection or review a job procedure. Stay proactive by conducting regular inspections and a job hazard analysis (JHA) to help you identify and correct hazards before an accident.

Fortify your facilities and structures

A strong safety program should extend beyond your workforce and include a plan for your greenhouse facilities. After all, protecting the structures that protect your crops is critical to your bottom line.

Here's how to develop a basic routine for preventive maintenance and facility inspections:

1. Electrical systems: Many fires are caused by the misuse and poor maintenance of electrical equipment, incorrectly installed wiring, overloaded circuits and the improper use of extension cords. First, establish a routine for monthly visual inspections, paying close attention to frayed wires and damaged or outdated electrical appliances. Second, schedule a comprehensive inspection by a licensed commercial electrician every three to four years. Your insurer may also have on-site thermographic screenings to help you identify anomalies that could result in a fire.

2. Boilers: When it comes to your boiler, you're looking for three main concerns—overheating, overpressure and water treatment. Set up a routine maintenance schedule that includes testing water quality, inspecting pressure vessels, checking for signs of leakage, and examining lift and relief valves.

3. Structural: Check the exterior of your structures for cladding issues like slipped glass, deflated film and loose fasteners. Bolts can loosen due to changes in temperature and movement of the structure from the wind. Check to make sure all bolts are properly tightened. Examine the exterior for signs of deterioration around load-bearing members and review areas where there's evidence of standing water. Any early warning signs should be repaired or replaced as soon as possible.

4. General housekeeping: Keeping your facility clean and organized can help you make a strong first impression with customers. It can also help you lower the risk of slip, trip and fall injuries. This means addressing spills promptly, clearing walkways of clutter and debris, and providing adequate lighting in areas with uneven surfaces.

The takeaway

Remember, prioritizing safety isn't about checking boxes; it's about building a culture where safety is a core belief throughout your operations and workforce. If you can prevent even one accident—from an employee injury to a facility fire—you're helping protect your business.

Feel free to use this article as a starting point as you look within your own greenhouse. Just remember, it shouldn't replace a safety program specific to your business. If you have any questions or concerns about your operation, never hesitate to reach out to a local expert or your insurer. They're available to partner with you in creating a safe and productive environment.

Best of luck this year and please reach out if you have any questions.

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