



First Line of Defense

Working in the green industry, the first order of business is to set up and maintain a safe work environment. Whether it is maintaining lawns, shrubs and trees or landscape construction and installation there are a variety of power tools and equipment that the professional landscaper uses. String trimmers, blowers and chain saws are only a few, and each carries it's own set of risks. To keep a safe work site it is important to minimize risk as much as possible.

The first line of defense in minimizing risk on the job site is PPE or Personal Protective Equipment. Training in the safe and proper use of tools and equipment is the most effective way to reduce accidents and injuries, however even the safest workers encounter unforeseen events which can result in lost work time. Worse yet work place accidents often result in permanent disability such as the loss of an eye or impaired hearing. PPE is the cheapest form of insurance we have against such incidents.

With all the noise created by power tools and equipment in the landscaping industry, hearing protection is probably the most widely underused form of PPE. Think of workers using backpack blowers, where the engine is close to your head! Now, hearing protection is not designed to totally block out all the noise, just bring it down to or below an acceptable level.(80db)There are a variety of foam ear plugs or ear muffs to choose from. One problem is that hearing loss is usually a slow and undetectable process so that it may a long time down the road when a person finally needs to get a hearing aid. Protect your hearing now so at least you will have the choice whether to listen to your grandchildren or leave the room later in life.

Eye protection is another important type of PPE. Safety glasses come in many different shapes and shades but the basic message is, our eyesight is important, lets take care of it. There are even anti-fog and anti-scratch gels and creams to keep your glasses clear and improve their wearlife. I think of how many string trimmer operators I see without safety glasses and it makes my head spin. I know that when using my string trimmer at home my safety glasses are usually well plastered with debris after just a half hour of use. Eye protection is also a must when using tools such as brush cutters , chain saws, and brush chippers.

Speaking of chainsaws, the chainsaw is a great tool, certainly faster than a two-man crosscut saw, but they are potentially very dangerous. Each year there are roughly 30,000 chainsaw related injuries that are reported in the U.S. and about 40% of these occur in the leg area. More widespread use of chainsaw resistant chaps or pants would greatly reduce this number. While chaps or chainsaw pants may not be 100% chainsaw cut proof they will stop many cuts from occurring and reduce the severity of others.

Another form of PPE that is critical in certain situations is a hard hat or helmet. When overhead hazards are present such as during tree work or when working around large equipment such as excavators or cranes some form of head protection is a must. I once heard it said that the only person who doesn't need a hard hat in those situations is the person with nothing on their shoulders worth protecting. So, even though they may be warm and uncomfortable in hot weather, we all do have something worth protecting on our shoulders!

Proper footwear, usually a good sturdy boot with ankle support and a good tread is also important. When the work area is slippery or uneven, good traction will help keep you off your back. Some boots even come with a hardened toe cap which reduces the chance of crushed toes.

Lastly, gloves are a good idea when working with any number of power tools. This can help dampen vibration which can lead to fatigue. Gloves are also a must when working on certain tools such as when sharpening or changing the chain on a chainsaw or when working with plants with thorns. How many times have we gotten a nagging little cut on a finger that might have been prevented had we been wearing gloves.

While reducing potential risk in the job place is largely a result of good planning and proper training, the use of the appropriate personal protective equipment is a key factor in reducing accidents. Each year thousands of accidents resulting in countless hours of lost work time occur because workers aren't wearing the proper PPE. Too often workers think they don't need PPE because they haven't been hurt in the past. Don't wait to become a statistic.

And finally, the best reason to wear PPE isn't because I tell you to or even because your boss tells you to. The best reason is because it is highly likely that there is someone at home who cares about you and is counting on you to come home at the end of the day in one piece and that PPE is you're first line of defense that keeps you from getting hurt or saves your life.

Please work safely!
Rip Tompkins, ArborMaster®