

Are gardens safe havens?

Gardens can be large or small, but their purpose is to enhance our lives without many worries. However, few people think about safety when they converse about their landscaping project. The most important concerns discussed in nurseries at the time people buy their plants are color, texture, size, and maybe general yard conditions on their site. A well designed landscape not only provides beauty and a well functioning outdoor space, but it also increases safety inside and outside the home. Some things concerning safety in a mature landscape can be changed with ease and some require more work. Here are a few things to consider:

1. Paths are important. They should be well lighted and easy to maneuver. While designing a path some questions have to be asked, like: will children, elderly or disabled people use it and how often? What are the areas the path connects and what is its purpose? Depending on the answers a good path can be built.
2. Plants and lighting can influence indoor safety as well. Thick, overgrown plants, or not enough light in front of doors and windows make a home an easy target for robbers, who can stay out of site while breaking in.
3. Lighting along a path can make a difference for the safety of those walking the route.
4. Plants placed too closed to walls will hold moisture on the wall and mildew can grow on the siding and even inside or on the walls. These plants also make maintenance work difficult.
5. Fire is a serious concern in the dry summers. Trees with branches hanging onto the roofs pose great fire danger, so does all the dry dead plant material that is inside shrubs in beds near the building.
6. Some aggressive vines, such as wisterias should never be climbing on a deck attached to the house. As the vines mature they often lift up decks and arbors, tearing them off of buildings and damaging the structures.
7. Childproofing a garden is just as important as child proofing a house. Some plants have beautiful, but poisonous berries. Other plants have thorns on them and can cause grave injuries. Many plants attract bees and are hazardous around children, especially if the children are allergic. The biggest danger for children is water in the garden. Small children can drown in very small and shallow water. If a

garden has any open water, whether it is natural or built, a secure fence around it can save children's lives. Enclosed fountains which have no open water surfaces are children friendly water features.

8. The West Nile virus is spread by mosquitoes and mosquitoes lay their eggs into standing water. If the water is moving like a stream or fountain, the mosquitoes will not use it. Caution and research is necessary before any chemical is used in the landscape. The safest is hiring a dependable professional who is trained, certified, and uses integrated pest management (IPM) techniques.
9. Chemicals bring up another important issue: treated products in the garden. Structures and equipments have to last in harsh conditions and often treated materials are used. Many are toxic if touched, licked (children and pets do that!) or toxins leak from them into water, soil, and eventually into edible plant materials, like fruits and vegetables. Safe alternatives are available today at most building material stores.

The above list is only a sampling of the most important issues in a garden when it comes to safety. Some things concerning safety in an already built landscape can be changed with ease by any home owner and others require major reconstruction. Reliable professionals can help eliminate hazards in a landscape and doing so can even save money in the long run. If people and the environment are both considered with care, gardens can truly be safe havens.

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