

RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

Christmas Tree Management Shearing and Pruning Safely with Hand Tools

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In managing a Christmas tree operation, shearing Christmas trees is one of the most important cultural activities for the grower. Regardless of the species, shearing is necessary to attain and maintain the proper and desired “Christmas tree shape.”

Unfortunately, shearing is also labor intensive. While there are an increasing number of machines designed for shearing on the market (which still, of course, require operators), the majority of New Jersey Christmas tree growers still rely on hand tools: hand-held clippers, shears and shearing knives. Many growers also train and hire workers for shearing. Quite often, these growers find there is a high associated turnover rate and they are constantly hiring and training new workers each year.

The nature of the work and frequent need for training new-hires makes shearing potentially one of the most accident-prone operations in Christmas tree production. To minimize these occurrences, growers should strive to work safely at all times during shearing operations, and stress safety when hiring and training workers for shearing.

The following is a safety checklist for shearing with hand tools:

1. Use the tool with which you are most comfortable.
2. Keep all cutting tools—clippers, handshears, knives—sharp. Either “touch them up” periodically through the work day to maintain a sharp cutting edge, or have several tools available and exchange periodically for a sharper one. Dull, poorly maintained tools cause accidents.
3. Minimize the pitch buildup on cutting tools by periodically removing it or exchanging for another, clean tool.
4. Avoid reaching into and holding a branch or top to be cut with your free hand and cutting it with hand clippers held in the other hand; it’s an easy way to cut yourself badly. Wear a protective glove on your “off-hand.”
5. Permit no “horsing around” or “roughhousing;” shearing tools are just that, not toys.
6. Use a glove to improve grip when using knives.

7. Install a loop of cord or leather large enough to wear over the wrist through the knife handle. Wear it over the wrist when shearing.
8. Carry a sharpening steel or some other similar rod or stick 12 to 18 inches long when using knives, to avoid reaching into the tree or holding branches with the free hand while shearing.
9. Wear a protective glove on the “free hand” when using knives.
10. Wear protective chaps or leggings when shearing with knives.
11. Use steel-toed boots for protection and ankle support.
12. Learn and practice the correct cutting stroke when using knives to minimize arm, wrist and hand fatigue and injury.
13. Use a cutting stroke that moves down and away from your body.
14. Do not step or move into your cutting stroke; move backwards around the tree as you shear with knives.
15. Use a stepladder when necessary to reach the tops of tall trees. Always have someone hold the stepladder.
16. Stay alert when shearing; watch for such things as holes and bee or wasp nests.
17. Have first-aid equipment available in the field with you.
18. Carry a bee sting treatment kit with you if you are or suspect you are allergic to insect stings.
19. Stay alert and take proper precautions if you are susceptible or highly allergic to poison ivy.
20. Learn about lyme disease and take the necessary precautions to avoid contracting it: dress properly; use repellents; inspect yourself during and at the end of the day for ticks; look closely wherever clothing has constricted or ended and at hairlines and scalp.
21. Avoid dehydration when working in heat and direct sunshine. Bring and drink plenty of water.
22. Know the early symptoms of heat prostration.
23. Break frequently to minimize fatigue.
24. Schedule shearing as early in the day as possible to take advantage of cooler temperatures.
25. Use sunscreens.

Working safely is important in all aspects of Christmas tree production. While shearing may be one operation with a high potential for accidents, proper planning, precautions, training and common sense can minimize potential problems.

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