

# **Managing health and safety at the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland**

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In the modern botanic garden today the management of health and safety is an evolving but fundamental feature of the management process requiring careful consideration in terms of how it is managed. It is therefore an intrinsic part of the day-to-day institutional operations. Health and safety initiatives are put in place to protect staff working within the garden and visitors who come to enjoy the garden. In order for health and safety measures to be effective there must be input from all staff within the garden using basic observation and experience to pinpoint areas and issues where risk is present. It is clearly laid down in law that all members of staff have a responsibility to observe and to mitigate against all risks.

In this respect management of health and safety is all about understanding and minimising potential hazards. Having done this it is essential to put in place safe methods of work, at the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland these are called 'Safe Operating Procedures' (SOP's).

In Ireland today the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 applies to all work places. This act covers such items as the employer's obligation, the workers obligation, and the obligation of other users of work areas. Any transgression may be investigated and if necessary fines imposed and in certain circumstances jail sentences handed down.

The Safety Manager has overall responsibility for health and safety and must ensure that adequate budgets are put in place to implement safety policy and that an effective Safety Committee is in operation. The Safety Manager must appoint an Assistant Safety Manager who will normally oversee the implementation of the Safety Manager's decisions according to current regulations.

The Assistant Safety Manager ensures that the Safety Committee meets regularly, observes where health and safety is effective or lacking and addresses issues before accidents happen, ensuring that a flow of information is maintained both at committee level and among staff in general. The Safety Committee is key to the smooth running of safety policy. It is the vehicle through which all issues are fully dealt with. The Safety Committee is elected at a general staff meeting after which roles are given to the elected members. The Safety Committee sits for a period of three years at which point further elections will take place. The committee ensures that there is adequate consultation between staff and management. It reviews all training issues, health and safety matters making recommendations where necessary. It is essential that accurate minutes of all meetings be taken. The Safety Manager is obliged to attend at least two meeting of the Safety Committee each year. A Safety Committee has been in operation at Glasnevin since 1969.

The Safety Representative has an important role, being appointed by staff to monitor health and safety. He or she consults directly with management and is given full access to all information in relation to safety matters. Appropriate training is given to the Safety Representative so that he has an understanding of current legislation regarding health and safety. The Safety Representative is the link person between staff and management.

Under Irish legislation all places of work must have a site-specific safety statement, which documents the safety policy. It is a working document and is reviewed and updated annually. Staff must be made aware of it and given the opportunity to become familiar with it particularly at induction to the workplace. The safety statement contains general information regarding the management of safety within the Gardens, hazard & risk assessments

and safe operating procedures for the various tasks that are undertaken both regularly and infrequently. Reference is also made to the management of visitors particularly with regard to lost children etc. The safety statement must be readily available to all staff and it is of benefit to have several copies of the statement in different locations to allow easy access. Hazard & risk assessment is an examination of any possible risk associated with particular tasks. Specially designed forms, with a list of questions and tick boxes, ensures that all hazards are considered and appropriate measures put in place to eliminate risk to staff and visitors. Safe operating procedures are written based on the risk assessment and are put in place for all routine work. Trees are assessed on an annual basis for potential risk and an agreed qualitative scale (1-4) is in use. High-risk specimens are included in a programme for restoration or removal. The information is recorded and updated in the plant catalogue.

Appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) must be provided to protect staff at risk while undertaking work practices. The wearing of protective footwear is obligatory and all staff are issued with steel toe capped shoes or boots along with other items of clothing including suitable waterproof rain jackets and trousers. Gloves, eye and ear protection, and facemasks are issued periodically as required. More specialised equipment is made available to staff particularly when using chain saws.

Training is an integral part of safety management and includes manual handling training, which should be made available for staff at induction to the workplace. Other types of training include first aid, personal safety, safe use of all types of machinery and use of chemicals. Some training courses may only take a half-day whereas others may take a week or in some cases two. Refresher courses are required at regular intervals. On completion staff are issued with certificates and accurate records are kept in a database.

A senior member of staff coordinates the management of fire safety. The fire register contains information relating to fire drills, fire safety training including the use of extinguishers and maps with the locations of fire hydrants. Fire Marshals are appointed to specific areas of the workplace. In the event of a fire, the emergency services must have easy access to the fire register.

Despite best practice and efforts accidents do happen and are damaging to the morale of the workforce. They are potentially expensive to the employer due to loss of man-hours from injury and possible compensation. There is a set procedure for the investigation of serious accidents, which must be undertaken within 24 hours of occurrence. It is important to keep records of all accidents and near misses however trivial as valuable lessons may be learned from them.

In this age of technology it is possible to have a tailored made database available to keep accurate health and safety records. Maintaining excellent records is an essential part of implementing an effective institutional health and safety policy. Within the data base records of all accidents, training, issuing of PPE, job safety plans, asset register and machine maintenance can be accessed and updated as required.

A botanic garden's vital assets, along with its plant collections, are its workforce and its visitors. The management of safety issues must be kept in proportion, getting work completed and keeping everyone safe. It requires input from staff, taking responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others. The complex and varied working environment of the botanic garden means that health and safety will increasingly be an important, time consuming and high profile management issue that needs to be addressed by all botanic gardens