

Spring in Montana: From Moving Snow to Mowing Lawns

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It's that time of year again when conditions change drastically by the day – if not by the hour – and Montanans are fond of declaring, If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes and it will change! In short, spring has sprung. This means that it's time to get out the sunscreen and light jacket while keeping close at hand your winter coat and gloves. It's also time to think through a number of possible spring and summer weather scenarios in order to avoid costly claims.

Sticking with a focus on clothing, you should take time to consider the appropriate protective apparel prior to engaging a project or operating potentially hazardous machinery. These items include, but certainly are not limited to, the following:

- Ear and eye protection
- Job-specific gloves (to protect hands from injury)
- Sturdy footwear with good traction (avoid sandals or sneakers)
- Long pants and long-sleeve shirts (be sure these fit well and are not too loose or baggy)

As for using such machines as weed eaters, lawn mowers, and snow blowers, the employee must be properly trained on the safe use of the equipment prior to operating it. This training involves inspecting such functional components as guards, shields, and belts to ensure that they are securely in place and in good working condition. It likewise entails knowing enough to fuel your equipment carefully, making sure, for instance, that the fuel is stored in an appropriate container away from ignition sources. Also, never attempt to fuel a combustion-powered machine while it is running, as the engine remains hot after use; further, do not gas up the machine while you are in the vicinity of an ignition source, including people smoking cigarettes.

Before starting the machine, check to make certain that other people, pets, and personal property are at a safe distance away and that there are no sticks, stones, wire, or any other type of debris that could become a propelled object. Once you have started the machine, keep all body parts away from exhaust areas, which can reach extreme temperatures quickly. Finally, if you need to make any repairs or adjustments to the machine, make sure it is turned off and the spark plug disconnected before you begin working.

Lawn Mowing Safety:

There are four main types of lawn mower accidents of which you should be aware: overturns, propelled objects, incidences involving a rotating blade, and mishaps wherein a person or vehicle is struck by a riding lawn mower. To help avoid these and other similar kinds of accidents, there are some general precautions that you can take. First, do not allow students younger than 16 to use ride-on mowers; second, do not allow passengers on ride-on mowers; third, purchase and use only those types of mowers equipped with a control that stops the blade from turning when the operator lets go of the handle; and, finally, before using any type of mower, make sure that you know how to operate all aspects of the machine.

Here, then, are a number of more specific guidelines concerning proper operational procedures and sensible, safe habits:

1. Pick up objects such as stones, sticks, and wire before mowing begins.
2. When possible, drive forward and *not* backward while operating riding lawn mowers (many, but not all, new riding mowers include a safety device that disengages the blade when the mower travels backwards).
3. When you do have to go backwards, pay special attention to potential hazards and holes.
4. When using push mowers, avoid when possible pulling the mower backward in order to mow in reverse; when you must mow backwards, be aware of where you are in relation to the mower deck so that the mower does not come in contact with your feet.
5. Always turn off the mower and wait for the blades to stop *completely* before removing the grass catcher, unclogging the discharge chute, or crossing gravel paths, roads, or other areas.
6. Never point the discharge chute at others; you never know when you might run over a rock or other debris – if propelled by a mower, these items can easily cause injury to a person or damage property.
7. When mowing on a slope with a riding mower, use caution, slow down, and avoid making sharp turns; it is usually safer to mow a steep slope up and down on a riding mower and across with a push mower. However, never mow a slope that is so steep your tires or feet have no traction.
8. Never leave the mower running unattended.
9. Turn the mower off prior to repairs or maintenance.
10. Only operate a riding mower from the driver's seat.

Weed Eater Safety Precautions:

1. When fueling a weed eater, make sure that you have the correct fuel mixture.
2. When you start the weed eater, make sure that you have good balance and footing; hold the machine with two hands, and make certain that you are in an open area.
3. Never raise the cutting part of the weed eater above waist height.
4. Never raise the speed of the string above a speed required to cut the vegetation.
5. Do not operate a weed eater in the immediate vicinity of others – debris from a weed eater can fly over 30 feet.
6. Keep in mind that it is better to weed eat an embankment or slope, rather than trying to mow it.
7. Make sure the machine is off and completely stopped before touching blades.
8. Be extremely careful when changing and cleaning blades.

Severe Weather Precautions

The best way to prepare for severe weather is to have a plan in place to deal with whatever natural disasters Mother Nature has in store. Every school should have a plan for addressing natural disasters, and everyone should be familiar with protocol regarding each event. During the spring and summer months, severe weather can produce tornados and thunderstorms. Lightning, heavy rain, destructive hail, and high winds associated with even garden-variety thunderstorms can cause personal injury and property damage. Hence, it is best during any storm to listen to the local news to stay informed. In the event a spring snow storm moves through the area, be prepared to break out the snow removal equipment to tend to the sidewalks and parking lots. Moving the snow with machines should be the preferred mode of operation, as it will alleviate injuries associated with shoveling the wet, heavy snow.