

# YOUR GARDEN

## The Dirt On Safe Gardening

by Susie Coelho

(NAPS)—Gardens can be filled with beautiful surprises: Last fall's geraniums that survived the winter, spring-blooming daffodils against a backdrop of bluebells or that first ripe tomato.



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Unfortunately, most gardens can hold some unpleasant surprises. From stinging insects and toxic plants, to the sun's burning rays, such problems can cause skin irritation and itching for days or even weeks.

To help root out any potential problems in your garden, try these tips before digging in the dirt:

- **Gloves are a must.** Toiling in the soil can take its toll on the hands. Handling fertilizer and weeds or even pruning and raking can drain skin of moisture and emollients. Choose light cotton gloves for planting and weeding and heavier leather gloves for jobs such as hedge trimming and pruning.

- **Don't forget the sunscreen.** Hours spent in the garden usually mean hours spent in the sun. Be sure to protect yourself from harmful ultra violet rays with at least an SPF 15 sunscreen.

- **Buzz off!** To avoid being bugged by mosquitoes and other pests, wear long pants, socks and long sleeves. Also, avoid gardening during the early evening (when mosquitoes tend to be at their worst). If you are bitten by a mosquito, use an anti-itch medication such as Lanacane® Anti-Itch Creme to help relieve the discomfort. In addition to helping stop the itch, the cream contains an antibacterial that can help ward off infection. The product can also be an effective way to relieve the pain caused by bee stings or irritation caused by poisonous plants.

- **Soil, soil everywhere...** Maintain a balanced soil pH to help plants (and your skin) thrive. If your soil is highly acidic, add neutralizing lime. If soil is too alkaline, add garden sulfur to increase acidity.

- **On bended knee.** Extended gardening sessions tend to put stress on the knees and back. Be sure to stand up straight periodically and give your body a break.

- **Poisonous plants.** Learn how to identify toxic plants, including poison ivy, oak and sumac. Despite nearly 90 percent of the country being sensitive to such plants, a survey found 60 percent of gardeners can not identify them.

If you come across a toxic plant, be aware that its roots can cause as much havoc as its leaves and that urushiol oil (the sap that causes itchy reactions) can often be found in the soil surrounding the plant.

- **Wash your tools.** Be sure to clean your garden tools after each use—especially if you've been near poisonous plants. Plant toxins can remain active on a tool for months.

- **Bee careful.** To help prevent painful or itchy insect stings, protect yourself from sunburn and find out the specific areas in which poison ivy grows, visit [www.lanacane.com](http://www.lanacane.com). The Web site includes such features as a Summer Itch Index and a Sting Forecast.

The site can help homeowners avoid some of the pitfalls associated with making a garden grow. And equally important, for each Web visitor to the gardening section, Lanacane will donate money to the American Community Gardens Association.

*Ms. Coelho is an expert gardener and host of Home & Garden Television's top-rated series Surprise Gardener.*