

CHEMICALS AND FIRE

Tim Haley¹

The "School of Hard Knocks" taught me an interesting lesson during our recent greenhouse fire. Perhaps I can spare my fellow growers from learning the hard way.

The pesticide storage area at our Columbia Street facility was located inside the greenhouse that burned. As well as making the fire difficult to fight, one fireman was injured

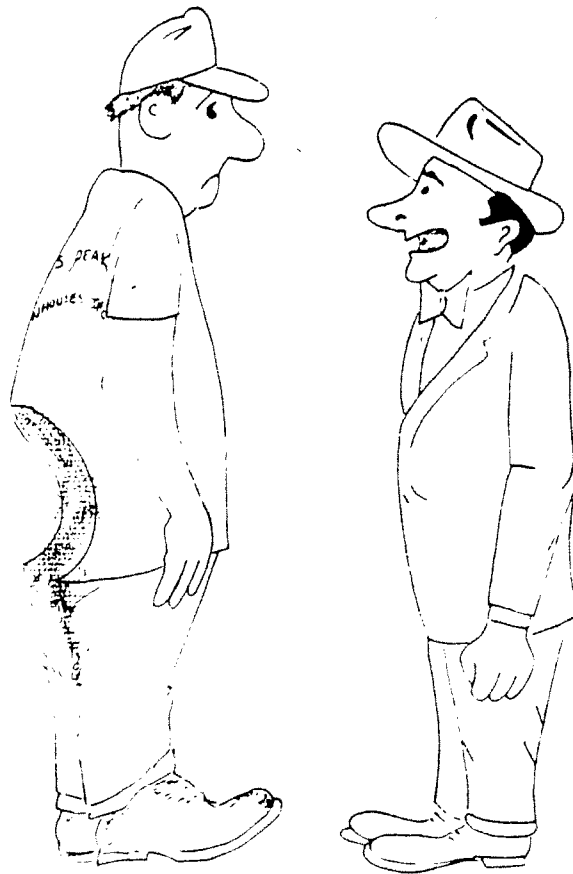
when he was exposed to an unknown agent. It turned out later that the agent was Amphyl, a disinfectant-detergent. That fireman would not have been injured, and my clean-up would have been greatly simplified, if I had not allowed the fire fighters to move any chemicals once it was apparent that the fire had been controlled, and that these chemicals were not in any danger of being burned. I do not mean to belittle the Fire Department's efforts because they were Herculean. They managed to move several tons of fertilizers in fifteen minutes while wearing rubber suits and

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airtanks — something I think would make a great weight-loss program for anybody. The problem with moving chemicals during fire is that they tend to get mixed up. You have to treat all chemicals as though they were the most deadly because they may well be. Chemicals should be left undisturbed until they can be dealt with rationally. You can then put most of the stuff back into inventory, saving money, assuming they have not been subjected to moisture or heat. This saves money not only in replacing chemicals, but primarily in the reduced cost of providing hazardous material disposal. Currently, the only nearby hazardous chemical dump suitable for these materials is in Utah, and the cost involves buying a heavy-duty, high-quality, EPA-approved 55-gallon barrel, and the dunnage material such as vermiculite, wood chips or sawdust. And, of course, somebody has to be paid to transport and receive these lethal barrels.

The one pleasant surprise that I had was on how well packaged most chemicals are. Even though the outer labels were scorched, it was obvious that the actual chemical had never been hot because of the foil layer incorporated in most chemical packages. I was able to handle the chemical with a great deal of safety because of that factor. That is why it is most important not to move chemicals around because you might have six bags of Captan together and only three of them would have the label burned to an unrecognizable state, but you could still deduce that the material was Captan because you had it in the Captan storage area in your cabinet. If, however, someone had thrown three unlabeled bags of Captan in with two unlabeled bags of Thiodan and three unlabeled bags of Benlate, you would not have a ghost of a chance sorting out which is which.

I know I couldn't taste the difference



Well, Haley, how'd things turn out on the greenhouse fire?