

FIRE HAZARDS IN YOUR GREENHOUSE

Joseph J. Maisano, Jr.
Extension Agent—Horticulture

Did you ever consider what might happen in case of fire in your establishment? Fire is unpleasant to think about. As a greenhouse operator, one should realize that certain chemical reactions take place when pesticides, plastics, and other products are overheated. One never knows when a fire can happen. It is better to plan ahead to deal with an emergency. Here are some things to consider:

Use a separate building for storage of pesticides when possible. In most cases, a separate room or cabinet may be more practical. It should be marked on all sides with a waterproof sign so that the observer will know the contents quickly.

Pesticides and especially herbicides should be stored away from fertilizers.

Many types of plastics produce toxic fumes.

Tell your local fire department where and what type of materials you have stored. They can give you professional advice on storage.

Are you prepared to cope with these fire hazards:

1. TOXIC FUMES OR SMOKE

a. Organophosphates such as parathion, carbamates such as Seven and chlorinated hydrocarbons such as lindane can be highly toxic.

b. Organic solvent fumes are toxic.

c. Plastic pots, FRP (fiberglass) panels, polyurethane, styrofoam and polyethylene can produce toxic fumes and complicate any greenhouse fire.

2. HIGHLY FLAMMABLE OR EXPLOSIVE MATERIALS

a. Ruptured containers of E.C. pesticides, motor oil, kerosene, gasoline, etc. may add more fuel to the fire.

b. Aerosol containers may burst with dangerous force.

c. Some pesticides are carried in highly flammable and explosive solvents. An example is xylene used as a base for some oil fumigants.

d. Ammonium nitrate fertilizer is a serious fire hazard. When it burns, it releases large amounts of oxygen. This in turn will cause the fire to burn with even more intensity.

e. Calcium hypochlorite is commonly used in swimming pools as a sanitizer. It is a very reactive and powerful oxidizer.

f. Bottled gas such as used for CO₂ generation, acetylene and oxygen tanks are very explosive.

3. WATER DRAINING FROM A GREENHOUSE FIRE

a. Can be highly toxic if it carries a concentration of pesticides or other chemicals.

b. May be toxic to people, plants, and animals. Some of the materials can be absorbed directly into the skin.

c. May run off into ponds, streams, lakes, etc. and cause serious pollution problems if carrying a concentration of pesticides or other chemicals.

At this time, you might take time to look over your operation to see if any hazards exist and take action to correct them.