

City of Surrey parks arborist Victor Andre prunes a small tree in Surrey's Bear Creek Park with the assistance of parks labourer Justin Mulholland (right).

Stay grounded while using your ladder

By Lynn Welburn

Whether you're trimming trees or painting street signs — and your work involves lots of ups and downs — treat ladders with the same respect you'd give any potentially dangerous tool.

It's a message the City of Surrey aims to reinforce with employees who rely on ladders to do their work.

Since 2009, city parks crews have been following a mandatory set of safe ladder use practices. And, depending on the work being done, they receive a minimum yearly refresher on ladder safety during crew safety talks.

Ryan Brayfield, a Surrey park technician, says the new practices offer formalized, consistent training for new hires. "They provide easier, cleaner teaching tools," he says.

What's more, Neal Aven, the city's urban forestry and environmental programs manager, says the extra vigilance seems to be helping. "We've been keeping our injury levels very low," he says. "Regular reminders keep it top of mind."

WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Brian Wiens says ladders are often overlooked as a source of danger on worksites — and that's not just in construction, but in outdoor jobs such as landscaping or park maintenance. "People don't always use them appropriately," he says. "We see tons of incidents from falls; we see a lot of head injuries."

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According to WorkSafeBC statistics, between 2005 and 2014, workers experienced 3,157 serious injuries

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from ladder falls; 17 workers died. While most serious injuries occurred in the construction industry, more than 27 of public service sector claims are also serious injuries related to ladder use. Of these ladder-related serious injuries in the public sector, more than 20 percent are associated with labourers in parks maintenance, landscaping, and public works.

Here are five ways to stay safe on your ladder at work:

1 Make sure a ladder is the right tool

If much of your work involves being up high or using machinery requiring both hands, such as a chainsaw for limb trimming, it might be best to do the job from a basket or ascend the tree.

2 Use the right kind of ladder for the job

When you need more height and your main goal is access and egress, rather than working at height, an extension ladder works well. When you need two hands for the job, a stepladder may be more appropriate.

3 Inspect your ladder

Check the rails. A bent or dented rail could buckle or collapse. Check that no rungs or steps are missing, worn, or damaged, and that they are free of oil. Inspect

the feet to ensure rubber pads are in place to prevent slipping. If you find damage or defects, don't use that ladder. Report it to your supervisor. Take a moment to read the manufacturer's instructions for use.

4 Set up the ladder correctly

Place extension ladders on a firm, level surface and use leg levellers on uneven surfaces. Make sure it's at a four-to-one angle — for every four feet (1.2 m) up, place the base of the ladder one foot (0.3 m) from the support it rests against. If you're leaning it against a tree, make sure the rails — not the rungs — are supported. Place stepladders on a firm, level surface, make sure all feet are on the ground, and open and lock the spreader bars.

5 Climb safely

Always face the ladder. Use three-point contact at all times. If you need both hands to work, use a harness and wrap the lanyard around the ladder and the tree. Do not climb higher than the manufacturer's suggested maximum.

Next time — before you climb — check out the WorkSafeBC ladder safety portal at www2.worksafebc.com/Topics/EquipmentSafety/LadderSafety.asp (or go to “Safety at Work” on worksafebc.com and look under “Ladder safety”).

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