

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, May 2013

Careless Chris Gets Warmer

By: Kitty

"Ah, spring," rhapsodized Bill, holding up the handful of oxalis he had brought in from the parking lot, its bright yellow flowers brilliantly cheery. "When a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love."

"Then that young man doesn't work for Grounds, or he'd be thinking of ticks, chiggers, and weed-whacking the North Forty," grumbled Careless Chris as she finished lacing up her heavy boots. She had a healthy respect for the damage a string trimmer could do and always made sure she was dressed well for the job.

"Ah, the North Forty," Bill resumed in an exaggerated poetic tone, waving the oxalis theatrically. "Where a young landscaper's fancy turns to thoughts of shade and margaritas."

"And ticks! Do not forget the ticks," Ryan agreed cheerfully. He had done the North Forty job last year and did not envy Chris the amount of work it involved. With staffing cuts, the crew was down to one person for all the trimming that needed to be done in addition to the mowing and they were only given a single day on the schedule to complete it. The size of the area being cleared as a fire suppression measure made it a challenge that had begun to take on the aura of an initiation rite for the lowest ranked groundskeeper each year.

Knowing that everyone understood her plight and sympathized made the ritual hazing a little easier for Chris to take. "At least it will be somebody else's job next year," she said, trying to put a good spin on her day. Grabbing her coffee mug, she chugged the dregs of the mocha left in it so she could refill it from the break area pot before heading out. Between that and the Giant Cola Squishee she planned to pick up at the Quikkie-Mart on the way out, she figured she'd have plenty of hydration for the day's work – enough to keep her from being thirsty without having to quit and go find a bathroom every half hour.

"Maybe," Kristie said, looking deliberately skeptical. "Unless the hiring freeze means you're still at the bottom of the seniority list by then. Oh, and we had a tick test positive for Lyme disease a month ago, so be sure and tape up your tyveks nice and tight." She grinned wolfishly. Everybody who worked outside kept up with the weather reports and knew a minor heat wave was rolling over them. If the predictions were correct it was going to be at least 85 degrees by noon despite being so early in the year.

Chris looked so dismayed that Bill felt he ought to say something actually encouraging. "You can always ask for a student grounds assistant so there'll be somebody further down the listing than you by then." Bowing with a flourish, he offered her the wilting bouquet he had been holding. "Today, however, you must go gently into that road margin and rage against the growing of the thistles."

"And the ticks," Ryan added helpfully.

"Yes, yes, I got the part about the ticks. See you guys tomorrow." Chris rolled her eyes and headed for her truck, glad she'd loaded the trimmer and enough fuel earlier and had a good-sized breakfast before leaving home. Another ten minutes of listening to her coworkers' schadenfreude would not have been worth the free bagel on offer that morning at the tool shed.

Even with an early start and an enormous slushy drink she was facing a daunting task. The equipment operators had already been through and finished mowing the day before but the boundary curbs, fences, light poles, and occasional shrubs all had to be neatly shorn of their fringes as well. Not fond of breathing the dust that trimming raised, Chris chose to wear an N95 respirator under the required face shield that kept rocks and other debris from hitting her face, and she prided herself on always wearing the proper gloves for her work as well. Seeing her work on campus, people had sometimes asked her how she could stand wearing so much stuff during the summer but she hadn't really found it that difficult to do. Wearing the same stuff over the course of the year allowed her system to acclimatize to seasonal changes in the average temperature so even though wearing all the required gear could be somewhat uncomfortable, it was never so bad that she was really tempted to take a chance on working unprotected.

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Today was going to be tougher since the heat was coming on suddenly but she was determined to stick to doing her job right and even taped the white tyvek coveralls at her ankles as suggested to avoid giving the springtime abundance of tick nymphs an easy job of getting at her skin. By the time most of the campus population was arriving and jockeying for a parking space, Chris was already swinging the ten-plus pounds of her string trimmer in smooth, controlled arcs over the road's verge and around the decorative rocks spaced along it. The job could be boring but she found it actually relaxing to sink into a sort of zen oneness of focus mixed with a contented sense of anticipated fulfillment. After hours of work, being able to look at what she had done at the end of the day and see she had created a real difference always made her grateful she hadn't gotten stuck in an office job on a computer instead.

As the sun rose higher and the already small shadows thrown by her weed-encircled targets shortened, she could tell the weather forecast had more likely underestimated than exaggerated the day's high. Sweating more profusely than she was used to, she had to stop often to lift her face shield and wipe at her forehead. The first few times she also did some stretching and finished off her coffee, but a glance over what she had finished so far and the area left to do made it painfully clear she was going to have to hustle to get done before the end of the shift. By then she was far enough away from the truck that hiking back over to it and returning would take time she didn't want to spare if she didn't need to refuel the trimmer, so she reluctantly decided to leave the big icy drink to melt in the cab and finish the trimming work before her lunch break, hoping her drink wouldn't be too tepid by then to be appealing at all.

Depressingly, lunch was still nearly two hours away. The trimmer felt heavy, turning into an awkward weight that was radiating heat like a hand-held nuclear furnace and Chris was having a harder time controlling its path as efficiently as before. She could feel the sweat pooling around her ankles and sticking all her clothes to her body under the coverall, and her breathing was getting harsher. It was so humid inside the dust mask that she pulled it off and gasped; the air outside felt cool and refreshing by comparison. That sensation wore off far too quickly and she started to feel woozy and almost feverish. With barely enough consciousness left to realize she might be in serious trouble, she shut off the trimmer, set it down, and ended up collapsing in a heap next to it when standing upright was just too difficult to maintain.

The rustle of bugs in the grass became discernible to her as she groggily pulled off the face shield with its attached earmuffs and pushed back the hood of her coveralls. Getting even that much of the suit away from her skin revived her slightly and she pulled off the heavy gloves next. They were damp all the way through from sweat and her hands were beginning to chafe, but she hadn't even noticed it until she was looking down at them. The surprise woke her up a little more, enough to unzip the coveralls and try to wriggle out of them. They got stuck over her boots and after tugging fruitlessly at the tyvek for a few moments she realized what had happened. Sitting on the ground, she wrestled with the tape wrapped firmly around her ankles for a while before she managed to get it loose enough to pull the suit the rest of the way off.

"I am totally covered in ticks now, I know," she mumbled, rolling over to her hands and knees and undertaking the monumental effort of attempting to stand back up. It worked on the fourth try and she staggered determinedly back toward her truck, fixated on the cold drink waiting for her there.

Her lucky stars were out that day along with the unrelenting sun and she made it to the vehicle. Not only that, she hadn't lost the keys and the air conditioning was even working. After nearly an hour sitting the cooled cab, reading the flyer in her safety binder about heat illness, diagnosing her own brush with heat exhaustion and debating her options, Careless Chris decided to be smart rather than sorry and drove back to the office instead of returning to work. The North Forty wasn't finished for a few days, and by the time it was tackled again, the heat illness prevention plan made sure the next worker sent out to deal with it had the right training, communications, and provisions for shade, water, and rest to successfully get the work done.