

Landscaping

Landscaping - Shovelling and Digging

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What should you do before shovelling or digging?

- Contact utility companies for location of the cables, wires, and pipes before digging. In many areas it is illegal to dig unless you have called to have these utilities located.
- Wear the proper protective clothing (e.g., safety footwear, gloves, long pants, etc.) that is suitable for the task and the work environment.
- Choose the proper tool for the task and make sure it is in good condition.
- Remember that wet soil is heavy - adjust the amount of soil you put on your shovel accordingly.
- Keep your feet shoulder-width apart to stay balanced and not slip.
- Don't twist your body - turn your front foot in the direction you want to deposit the shovel's load.
- Keep a loaded shovel close to your body to keep you balanced.

There are many tips in other [Landscaping](#) OSH Answers documents.

In addition, there may be requirements in your jurisdiction's health and safety regulations relating to excavation and trenching. Always verify the legislative requirements before digging. For more information on trenching and excavation, please see the [OSH Answers: Trenching and Excavation](#).

What should I know about cave-ins?

One cubic foot of soil can weigh over 45 kg (100 pounds) - a small amount of soil falling into an unprotected trench can lead to injuries or fatalities. Even being buried up to the waist can lead to a fatality due to the pressure exerted on the body.

Determine if you have to take precautions against the possibility of a cave-in. Precautions may include:

- sloping the bank to prevent a cave-in
- shoring the banks with plywood, timber, or other materials to support the sides of a trench
- installing shields or trench boxes
- benching or making steps in the sides of the excavation

The protective measures that you have to take will depend on various factors like the size and depth of the excavation, and

- the kind of soil (e.g., clay can break off in large chunks without warning)
- if the soil has been recently excavated (e.g., soil that is "loose" may cave in more readily)
- the water content of the soil
- weather conditions (e.g., rainy, freezing temperatures)

The precautions you take will be different if you will be working in the hole rather than standing on firm, stable ground at the top of the hole (e.g., post hole, hole for planting a shrub, etc.).

The OSH Answers document [Shovelling](#) contains ergonomic information (e.g., weight limit, handle length, work pace).

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