

Don't Poison Your Children and Pets

By Gilbert Woolley/ Special To The Tab
Wednesday, March 1, 2006

This is the time of year when the poison salesmen are at their most active. They want to sign you up to have your lawn regularly sprayed with a liquid that contains synthetic fertilizers and also chemical poisons dangerous to children and pets. Of course these chemicals are also harmful to adults, but children and pets typically come into more and closer contact with a lawn, and children are more sensitive to small amounts of poisons. The poisons are also tracked into the home on footwear and by pets, so that a baby playing on the carpet can come in contact with them.

The lawn care industry warns you to keep off the lawn until the grass is dry and for 24 hours after application. However, when the lawn is watered either by rain or sprinkler the dry ingredients become liquid again. Furthermore, if the ingredients are "safe" after 24 hours, then presumably they are also ineffective against insects.

The non-fertilizer ingredients of lawn care products are designed to kill insects and "undesirable" broad-leaved plants, such as dandelions. As some of the same "building blocks" of life are present in humans, mammals, insects and even plants, it is a good conservative assumption that any chemical harmful to one form of life is likely to be harmful to other forms, including pets and humans and, most critically, to humans still in the womb. Also, when you kill insect predators that eat the undesirable insects and the birds that eat the insects, you must then rely exclusively on chemicals to keep undesirable insects in check.

Half of the 32 pesticides typically used by lawn care providers are recognized as likely or potential carcinogens, and there are many documented cases of children and animals becoming ill after coming into contact with treated lawns. It has been claimed, although not yet statistically validated, that women living in suburban homes with lawns subjected to "lawn care "have a higher rate of breast cancer and perhaps other cancers.

In the United States more than seventy million pounds of pesticides and herbicides are sprayed on lawns, trees and shrubs each year, and much of this finds its way into groundwater, rivers and streams and drinking water. Lawn care products are a major source of chemical pollution in the US, but the use of these products is simply not necessary. Organic treatments are available which do not poison your lawn or the environment, and there are many contractors who apply them, utilizing "Integrated Pest Management" (IPM). An article describing how IPM is being implemented by the City of Newton can be found in this month's Environment page.

How important is it to have a "perfect lawn" and does it justify the dangers to yourself, children and pets? My lawn has never been treated with pesticides or herbicides. It's not "perfect"; there are small patches of clover, but no dandelions. The secret is that every morning I look for dandelion flowers, which are not hard to see. When I am in a hurry, I just pull off the flowers and put them in the trash. If I have time, I uproot the

plant with a small two-pronged tool. At first, when there were a lot of dandelions, this required some time and effort but now, one or two dandelions a day is the most I see. If you stop them seeding they cannot reproduce. My neighbor has dandelions, but the flying seeds rarely travel very far. Sometimes I deflower my neighbor's dandelions that are near my driveway.

If you want to have a beautiful lawn and don't want to use poisons, the first thing to do is to make sure that you have sufficient depth of healthy soil to support a healthy lawn. The builder of my house had dumped debris on the garden and covered it with a couple of inches of soil. I replaced this muck with six inches of topsoil and compost, and seeded it. With a sufficient depth of healthy soil you need to water much less. In the summer of 2005 I did not have to water the lawn even once.

Toxics Action Center, www.toxicsaction.org, is leading the campaign in New England to stop the use of possible carcinogens in lawn care treatment.

Gilbert Woolley is a retired engineer. He has been a very active member of the Sierra Club since 1971, and he served on the Sierra Club National Toxics Committee for six years.

This article is archived at www.greendecade.org/tabarchive.asp.