

Gardeners Get an Earth Day Present from the Province Gary Westlake



Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners
<http://peterboroughgardens.ca/articles.html>

I have mixed feelings about the new Provincial ban on pesticides. It is a good thing that we have put a stop to the wasteful and potentially harmful practice of spraying our lawns just to remove weeds. Unfortunately, the new ban also puts a stop to a number of alternatives used by organic gardeners for many years.

The ban, comes into effect on April 22, replaces all of the existing municipal pesticide regulations including Peterborough's, and eliminates chemical control of weeds, pests and diseases. While you can hand pick bugs off your plants and dig weeds from your lawn, with a few exceptions, you are not permitted to spray.

Thank goodness, the casual and widespread use of pesticides by home-owners and lawn care companies in Ontario now is over. In the past, neighbours could smell the drift of chemicals without warning and without any idea of what was being sprayed. The potential impact of the chemical sprays affected pets and wildlife. It also included nearby plants which are highly susceptible to herbicides.

The selective herbicides also eliminated clover which is able to take the nitrogen from the air and feed the grass. With no clover, we had to continue to buy chemical fertilizer. There were beautiful lawns before we had 2,4D. They just required a bit more elbow grease.

Unfortunately, the new pesticides ban also eliminates a number of relatively harmless gardening practices.

It is possible to control insects by hand picking to a point but when they reach plague numbers, there is little an organic gardener can do to save plants than to spray with a dilute solution of soap. Ed Lawrence, a broadcaster and retired head gardener for several Governors General, and outspoken advocate of organic gardening, often gives a recipe of 1 part soap to 40 parts water to control infestations of insects. Although you can use soap in your kitchen sink and to clean windows inside and out you cannot use it in the garden to control insects. Similarly banned is the most effective means of controlling slugs on Hosta plants when they reach large numbers, is to use dilute household ammonia on and around the new shoots before they open. Ed Lawrence gives a recipe for this as 1 part ammonia to

10 parts water. The use of one percent baking soda or of one part 2 percent milk to two parts water which is less harmful than commercial fungicides is also banned.

The regulations contain a list of ingredients, considered relatively safe, which includes sulphur, mineral oil and acetic acid. As a consequence, commercial products containing these are still allowed like dormant oil which can be used to control overwintering insects and fungal diseases. It also includes horticultural strength acetic acid (vinegar) which is used to control weeds. Household vinegar, which is much more dilute, is now banned. Corn Meal Gluten sold and labelled for controlling weed seed germination in lawns is still allowed but the bulk unlabelled Corn Meal Gluten, which is the same product, is only permitted as a fertilizer. Biological products like nematodes for controlling lawn grubs are permitted.

The regulation contains some exemptions for golf courses, forestry, agriculture, and sporting events. The only exemption that affects the average home-owner is to control plants poisonous to the touch like poison ivy. Next year, the weed killer will be kept in a locked cabinet.

According to officials from the Ministry of the Environment, unless a solution is commercially available, registered and labelled, it is not permitted. Indoor insecticidal soaps can only be used indoors. The Ministry's position is that 'home brewed concoctions' which might contain anything from ground up cigarettes to rhubarb leaves are potentially harmful and untested. I think they might be overdoing the spin and they should have found a way to permit the use of simple solutions of household products in common use as alternatives to harsh pesticides. As it stands now, you need to find a commercially available insecticidal soap that is labelled and registered for outdoor use or you are out of luck.

For the most part, gardeners can get along just fine without chemical help, but there are occasions when simple home remedies are useful. Keeping plants healthy, using compost and catching problems early are your best defences against insects, weeds and diseases. Now that we have a Provincial Pesticide Ban they are just about our only defences.

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