

THE PANDORA'S BOX OF LAWN AND GARDEN CHEMICALS

For some, yard care can be a very rewarding pastime; for others, it is merely a chore necessary to protect the investment in a property's appearance. Regardless of motivation, most homeowners rely, at one time or another, on lawn and garden pesticides and fertilizers. Unfortunately, routine use of these chemicals threatens to open a Pandora's Box of unintended environmental consequences. Following some common-sense guidelines, however, will bring about healthy lawns and gardens and minimize environmental problems.

Be wary of the "chemical fix"

When the seasons change, you can almost feel it in the air – that urge to get out and do something in the yard. Unfortunately, what many people end up doing sometimes leads to more harm than good. Fertilizing without a soil test when the lawn really doesn't need it, using weed killers at the wrong time of year, spraying with insecticides "just to be on the safe side," even watering a little bit every day... are all wasteful and environmentally damaging practices.

Without thinking about it, some homeowners reach first for the "solution" that should be a last resort. The serious warning labels on many pesticide products clearly indicate the hazards to songbirds, aquatic life, and humans. In a sense, using such chemicals without proper diagnosis of the problem and careful application procedures is no different than a doctor prescribing medicine with potentially serious side effects for a condition that proper diet and moderate exercise could cure. Resist the urge for a quick chemical solution.

Develop a healthy respect

Because yard care chemicals have come into widespread and routine use for many homeowners, there is some danger that a "healthy respect" for them has faded. Homeowners may have used yard care chemicals before without incident. When pressed for time and confronted by profuse label directions and warnings in fine print, it's tempting to skip the instructions and just "get the job done." But pesticide application is not the time

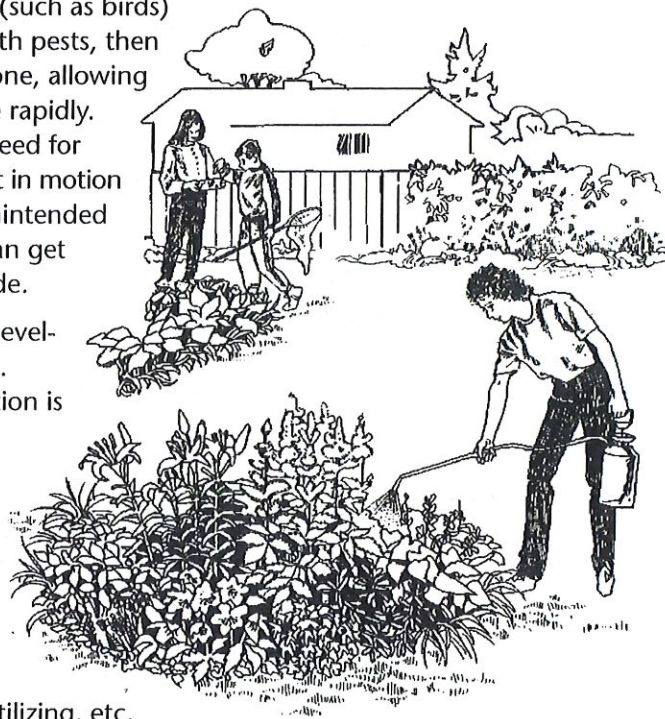
to overlook something important. The suffix "icide" means "to kill." Insecticides kill insects, herbicides kill plants and fungicides kill fungus species. While greater success is realized every year in developing chemical and application methods that are more target-specific, the fact remains that pesticides sometimes kill living things other than their targets.

Consider the side-effects

If beneficial predators (such as birds) are poisoned along with pests, then natural controls are gone, allowing pests to multiply more rapidly. This may further the need for more chemicals and set in motion an unfortunate and unintended cycle. Thus the yard can get "hooked" on a pesticide.

A similar pattern can develop with lawn fertilizers. When careless fertilization is followed by routine removal of grass clippings (a natural source of nitrogen) further fertilization is required. The cycle of fertilizing, rapid growth, more cutting and bagging, more fertilizing, etc. gets to be time consuming and costly. It also increases the chance that fertilizer will be washed off to lakes and streams.

On an individual lawn or garden the problem may not seem like much, but area-wide it adds up.



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