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Cleaner, greener ways to keep bugs at bay

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

When ants invade our home or wasps build a nest above the deck, even the greenest of us usually just nuke 'em with chemicals, thinking we have no other choice.

But greener alternatives do exist for those extreme pest problems bugging you this summer.

Q: What's so bad about using pesticides occasionally? I thought they were well-regulated.

A: Pesticides can improve human health and safety in some situations. But by their very nature, they kill living things, so they always pose a potential risk to our families, pets and the environment. Problems arise when consumers choose the wrong pesticides for the job, or use them incorrectly.

Although pesticides must be registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), this does not ensure they are safe. Testing for pesticide risks is an inexact science, and some pesticides registered with the EPA years ago have still not been fully tested.

Q: Is there one main thing to remember for greener, safer pest control?

A: Yes: First try to identify your pest precisely. For ants in your home, for example, are you sure they're ants and not termites? Do you have carpenter ants, which can cause the greatest problems? If not carpenter ants, which of the six other common Northwest ants are they? Different pest-management techniques work best for each species of pest.

You can easily find resources online or at the library to properly identify ants, wasps and other pests and determine the safest, most effective controls. The Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, or NCAP (www.pesticide.org), and the Washington Toxics Coalition (www.watoxics.org) both offer fact sheets on dealing with specific regional pests. The Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County (www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/yard) also provides many helpful tips.

Q: Let's stick with ants for a minute because I really hate seeing them in the house. Any more suggestions?

A: Simple preventive measures will keep your home free from most species of ants. To discourage moisture-loving ants, including carpenter ants, replace rotten wood and don't store firewood next to the house. Keep other species of ants at bay by sealing entry points and frequently cleaning kitchen surfaces. Once you've taken those steps, you may be able to mop or vacuum up any remaining ants.

Q: I think we have a nest of wasps under the gutter. What can we do?

A: Sprays often have little effect on wasp and bee nests. The best strategy is to just leave them alone if possible, says NCAP. Many bees and wasps help the garden and environment and won't sting unless provoked. If you must remove the nest, see NCAP fact sheets for tips. Homemade or purchased traps without pesticides may work on yellow jackets.

Q: What about fleas and ticks on pets?

A: In some cases a chemical treatment might be needed, but be sure to select and use flea and tick products very carefully.

This spring the EPA issued a consumer advisory for "spot on" flea and tick treatments, which are usually applied to a pet's back. Last year 1,300 fatal or major pet incidents linked to spot-on products were reported to the EPA. Other flea and tick products also may be hazardous. For more info, visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Web site (www.fda.gov/consumer then search for "flea").

Q: Let's end on a slimy note. How can I get rid of the slugs laying waste to my lettuce crop?

A: Avoiding toxic slug baits will help keep neighborhood pets safe. Beer traps may work, although not everyone finds them effective. Consider the relatively nontoxic iron phosphate slug baits.

Or try simply going out at night with a flashlight to pick off the slugs and then crush them, if that doesn't gross you out too much. At least with slugs, you know they won't outrun you.

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