

Columnists

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Pass on the pesticides: make peace, not war with your backyard bugs

Pesticides generate huge profits for manufacturers, but in reality, all those sprays, powders and dusts rarely provide the best solution for controlling insect problems.

By Tom Watson

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Go to war against bugs! That's what the pesticide industry tells us, with vivid ads about how we need to wipe out invading insects to protect our families, homes and yards.

But, as with many wars, the biggest winners are the ones selling the weapons. Pesticides generate huge profits for manufacturers, but in reality, all those sprays, powders and dusts rarely provide the best solution for controlling insect problems.

Q: Aren't pesticides safer than they used to be?

A: A few dangerous pesticides have been taken off the market over the years, but pesticides still frequently epitomize the old saying, "The cure is worse than the disease."

Chemicals in pesticides get into our bodies, potentially causing cancer and disrupting hormone systems. They can pollute our waterways and harm beneficial insects and wildlife.

Q: What's the alternative?

A: Pick your battles. Take action against insects only when they pose a significant threat to humans, pets, plants or food crops. Even then, your strategy does not usually need to involve toxic chemicals.

Many local gardeners happily live with a little bug damage. Insects that are natural predators often will eventually arrive and handle your bug problem. Pick insects off plants by hand or spray them off with water. Remove insect attractants in your home and yard such as rotting fruit, pet food or standing water.

Q: What about an insect problem we can't ignore, such as yellow jackets?

A: You should actually try to ignore or at least avoid yellow jacket and wasp nests if possible. If the nest sits high in a tree for instance, they probably won't bother you much, and yellow jackets never return to the same nest the following year.

But when yellow jackets build their nest near a walkway or deck, you'll want to get rid of the nest. Two nest-removal experts in Western Washington will come and vacuum yellow jackets out of the nest at no charge. They "flash-freeze" the yellow jackets and sell them to a laboratory in Washington state that processes their venom for use in allergy medicine.

In the north Puget Sound area, including all of King County west of Snoqualmie Pass, contact longtime yellow-jacket remover Doug Cheney at [425-485-0103](tel:425-485-0103) or by email at venomcollect4free@comcast.net.

In south Pierce, Thurston, Lewis, Mason and Grays Harbor counties, contact Mike Juhl at [360-866-1834](tel:360-866-1834) or through his website at hornetnestsfreeremoval.com. Cheney and Juhl may decline some requests based on current demand for specific types of venom.

If yellow jackets bother you during backyard gatherings, set out small plastic traps. Several brands of these yellow-jacket traps are now available, including Rescue, Safer and Woodinville-based Oak Stump Farms.

Q: What other alternatives to toxic-chemical sprays should I consider?

A: If you feel you must spray for soft-bodied insects such as mites, choose insecticidal soaps. They are among the safest pesticides, but they shouldn't be used near bodies of water.

Releasing ladybugs in your garden (buy them by the thousands at garden stores or online) helps control aphids, although many of the ladybugs typically fly into neighbors' yards.

The Grow Smart, Grow Safe guide (growsmartgrowsafe.org), a joint project of local governments in King and Thurston counties and the Portland area, offers tips on natural gardening and lists ingredients and potential hazards of many pesticides. King County residents can call the Garden Hotline (gardenhotline.org) at [206-633-0224](tel:206-633-0224) for a print copy.

Q: All right, I'm sold on waging less chemical warfare in my yard, but now how do I get rid of all the pesticides in my garage?

A: Old, unneeded pesticides are hazardous wastes and need to be disposed of properly.

For information on free household hazardous-waste disposal locations in King County, call the Household Hazards Line at [206-296-4692](tel:206-296-4692) or 1-888-TOXIC ED, or visit lhwmp.org/home/HHW/hhw.aspx.

Toxic chemicals don't need to be part of your gardening arsenal. Go natural and make peace, not war, with your bugs.

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