

Homes & Real Estate

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Lawn care: How to keep it safe and simple

To help us break the yard chemical habit, let's look at five common reasons consumers choose these products, and why they don't hold water.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

The rewards of using lawn and garden chemicals seldom justify the risks.

It really is that simple. The fewer pesticides, weed killers and chemical fertilizers we use, the better.

Potential risks include accidental poisoning; long-term health harm, especially to children; air and water pollution; habitat destruction; and increased climate change related to the fossil fuels used for production and transportation.

The chemical industry insists most of those negative effects will not occur if people use its products properly. It says many of those risks are speculative, and that it's up to the government to prove any risks beyond a shadow of a doubt.

But many of the claimed benefits of lawn and garden chemicals have not been unequivocally proven either.

To help us break the yard chemical habit, let's look at five common reasons consumers choose these products, and why they don't hold water.

We need to do something. The lawn has too many weeds or isn't green enough. The apples have spots. Wasps made a nest in the backyard. The roses have aphids.

It's always something, but you don't always need to leap into action. Instead, pause and consider whether a nonchemical approach or even simple tolerance might work.

Take a wasps' nest, for instance. Unless it's extremely close to where people need to be, many pest and wildlife experts recommend leaving it alone.

Most common types of wasps don't use the same nest two years in a row, so if you discover a nest in late summer, you may be able to wait them out for a few weeks.

It might solve the problem. That isn't enough. Only use chemicals if you have a high certainty they will do the job.

Some yard problems, such as highly invasive weeds, may need to be addressed with a combination of chemicals and other strategies.

Use extreme care with the poisons, and consult King County's Noxious Weed Control Program at kingcounty.gov/weeds or 206-477-9333 for tips and resources.

Nothing else works. This may have been true 20 years ago, but today, many effective solutions don't involve synthetic chemicals.

With a quick Internet search, one can find videos and other resources offering alternatives to chemicals. For expert advice, contact the Garden Hotline, managed by Seattle Tilth, at 206-633-0224 or gardenhotline.org.

Solutions may be as simple as spraying off aphids with water or using an ergonomic hand-weeding tool. Prevention helps, too, such as sealing off openings where wasps could build nests.

Today's lawn and garden chemicals are safe. True, some may be less hazardous than they used to be. But plenty of research exists documenting health and environmental concerns about heavily used yard chemicals such as "weed-and-feed" products and glyphosate weed killers.

People can improperly use pesticides, and pets and children may get exposed to them even when applied as directed.

Poison centers in the U.S. receive more than 140,000 pesticide-related calls every year. If you suspect poisoning from a pesticide or other substance, call the Washington Poison Center hotline at 1-800-222-1222.

An easy-to-use guide by growSMARTgrowsafe.org, a coalition of government agencies in King and Thurston counties and the Portland area, lists high-hazard chemical products and offers alternatives.

My parents used lots of yard chemicals. Nearly everyone did once, but now we have a much better sense of the environmental and health costs.

If you inherit lawn chemicals from your family or find them when moving into a new home, it's OK to carefully use up the least-toxic products for their intended purpose, if they're not too old.

Take unwanted lawn chemicals to a household-hazardous-waste collection location. Call the Hazards Line at 206-296-4692 for locations in King County.

Many chemical products for the yard are considered advanced and scientifically complicated, but we're better off when we keep things simple. Use less of them whenever you can.

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