

“Nature in the Neighborhood” – May Article

Be Pesticide Free

The first day of Spring has passed — though that’s always hard to tell in New England when it can snow in April or even May. Earth Day has also passed, though celebrated mostly digitally this year due to COVID-19. Many say that Rachel Carson’s 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, was the catalyst of the environment movement, leading to, not just Earth Day, but comprehensive federal legislation designed to “restore the integrity” of our nation’s waters and “protect the quality” of our nation’s air. *Silent Spring* specifically condemned the overuse of pesticides. As these bug killers – in particular DDT — made their way up the food chain, Ms. Carson concluded they were harming bird and fish populations and eventually could be a threat to us as well.

Many have heard of this seminal book, though few have actually read it. *Silent Spring* is, however, very much worth reading, even now, 50 plus years later, because we tend to forget. We forget how bad, environmentally speaking, things really were. Back then, Lake Erie contained so many toxic chemicals, that it was declared “dead.” Nothing could live in it. The Cuyahoga River was so burdened with pollution that it periodically combusted into flames. People died because of air pollution in London and New York City. People living next to toxic landfills, like Love Canal, sickened. And, as documented in *Silent Spring*, between 1950-1962 the amount of DDT found in human tissue tripled. It was bad. But we forget. That is, until something happens — like discovering children with elevated lead levels in Flint, Michigan.

We still use pesticides and herbicides and other poisons on our lawns and gardens. But why? The “bad” chemicals, like DDT, may be banned now (though surprisingly DDT is still found in the environment — like in our own Foster’s Pond in Swampscott), and other so-called “safer” pesticides have sprung up to take their place. But what are the long-term effects of these chemicals as they get into our environment? Into us? Into our children?

There are alternatives.

There are pesticide-free and herbicide-free landscape, turf, and lawn management practices that are cost effective, naturally sustainable, and healthy for people and the environment. Information on organic gardening

can be found on-line, for instance this introductory downloadable booklet on the BeyondPesticides.org website:

http://www.organiclandcare.net/sites/default/files/2016iolyfinalsingle_page_opt.pdf

It's worth the effort to explore and to put into practice organic gardening techniques. Scientific Studies have shown that lawn pesticides increase the risks of cancer, disease, infertility with the most vulnerable groups, children and pregnant women, being the most susceptible. These chemicals can also poison pets, kill wildlife, and leach into groundwater spreading to local water sources. And the danger isn't limited to just outside, pesticides can be tracked indoors and contaminate homes. If this isn't reason enough, eliminating or reducing pesticide use can actually save you money.

Implementing Organic Lawn Management on Town Properties

While Swampscott has had an Organic Pest Management (OPM) Policy in place for Town-owned properties for many years, the mandates have yet to be either incorporated into the Town's by-law or fully implemented. The Policy, which is well worth reading, can be found on the Town's Health Department site or at:

http://www.swampscottma.gov/sites/swampscottma/files/uploads/organic_pest_management_policy.pdf

Swampscott also has an Organic Lawn Maintenance Task Force that has been working with Town officials to explore ways to stop pesticide use and manage town-owned properties organically. The Task Force has been lucky to get advice from Chip Osborne (owner of Osborne Organics, Inc. and founder of the Organic Landscape Association), a professional horticulturist that has over 20 years' experience in creating safe, sustainable and healthy athletic fields and landscapes through natural turf management. The Task Force has also reached out to Marblehead which has managed all of its playing fields organically since 2002 following adoption of a policy that noted the adverse health and environmental effects of pesticides and made a commitment to protecting children's health. It's time that Swampscott also begin the transition to organic lawn care practices on Town-owned properties. It's something that will benefit not only the nature in our neighborhood but our own health as well.

“How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?”

— Rachel Carson, Silent Spring

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