

Talking to your Neighbors about Pesticides

Your neighbors use pesticides and you prefer not to. You may have wanted to talk to them about it but found it difficult or intimidating to do so. How do you bring the subject up, what would you tell them, and how should you handle it if they get angry or offended? You may feel that you don't know enough facts to answer their questions. You may feel that it's not worth risking your friendship, or at least your pleasant day-to-day interactions. After all, home yard care is like politics: personal and often controversial.

Why do you want to talk to them?

The dynamics of any conversation between neighbors about pesticides will depend on why the conversation is taking place, as well as personal knowledge and beliefs. The strong sense of property rights and personal privacy in this country can cause people to be defensive about how they manage their property. But remember that the non-pesticide user has rights, too! If chemicals drift across property lines or herbicide damage occurs, the need to act is urgent and the goals well defined. If, on the other hand, you are just generally concerned about possible health impacts to your children from playing on the neighbor's lawn, the issue is slightly different but still important. Concerns about water pollution or other environmental effects of pesticides need to be explained carefully and convincingly, noting that everyone's pollution is important even if it is small.

Getting started

Relationships between neighbors can range from friendly, cordial, and polite to antagonistic, hand-waving basis only, or to cursory uncertain glances while both neighbors rush to and from work. Deciding how and when to talk about pesticides depends on the

nature of the neighbor relationship and the personal reasons compelling the pesticide-free neighbor to broach the subject. In the case of pesticide overspray onto your property, a phone call or personal visit is certainly appropriate, and it is important to act quickly to document contamination. Contact the Washington State Department of Agriculture (877-301-4555) to report any overspray or other potentially illegal pesticide application in Washington.

For less serious situations, do whatever feels most comfortable. Having a chat while working in the yard can be a non-threatening way to break the ice. Another approach might be to invite a neighbor in for a cup of coffee or a beer. Whatever approach is taken, be polite and ready for any reaction, and be prepared to listen.

A positive approach is always more effective than one that puts people on the defensive. For example, mention a new lawncare service that doesn't use pesticides. Or suggest a new pest control product that is less toxic. That way, the talk turns to the alternative first, and the conversation can come around to the hazards later, perhaps as you explain why you made the choice you did.

There are no magic words that will get your neighbors to change their practices. The best advice is to remember that they very likely do not know much about the negative effects of pesticide use or about available alternatives. The general idea with these conversations is to "start where they are." This means putting yourself in their place and understanding not only why they are using pesticides, but also what will be an effective way for them to begin thinking about changing their yard-maintenance practices. Offering least-toxic substitute products can be an easy way to begin this, since many people equate killing pests with



reaching for a spray bottle and healthy lawns with monthly visits from the spray truck. Just remember where they are coming from, and the conversation will be easier.

What to say

Keep it as simple and non-technical as possible. If your concern is primarily human health, focus on that as a starting point. Watch for their reaction as you talk, and if any point seems to play well, you can enlarge on it. Here are some ideas for topics that you might discuss:

Children are so much more vulnerable than adults are.

They are smaller, eat and drink more per pound, are still developing, and have behaviors that put them at risk (playing on the grass, mouthing their hands, going barefoot, etc.)

There's so much we don't know about pesticides.

Only the active ingredients are known, and they usually make up less than a few percent of the product. Full product formulations aren't tested for long-term effects. Exposures to multiple chemicals aren't considered.

Levels of pesticides in our streams are already hurting salmon.

In King County, 23 pesticides were found in streams. Five insecticides were at levels that may harm salmon and other aquatic life. And that doesn't even take account of combined effects from several chemicals in one stream.

Many effective alternatives are readily available.

More and more stores are stocking less-hazardous products for garden and lawn care. You can ask your neighbor what their major problems are and focus in on alternatives for those pests. For example, if their biggest problem is weeds, you can give them a Natural Lawn Care brochure or a weed management fact sheet from Washington Toxics Coalition.

Many lawn care companies offer an organic or low-pesticide approach.

It's true. There are companies that offer or even specialize in a sensible approach to pesticides. If you have experience with a company, you might make a referral. Those living in the Seattle area can call us (206-632-1545 or 800-844-SAFE) for suggestions. In

the Puget Sound area, the EnviroStars program has a certification program that identifies outstanding landscaping companies. You can phone toll-free at 1-877-220-7827 or visit the EnviroStars website at www.envirostars.org. This program is new, so there may not be many companies listed yet, but expect a lot of additions in the near future.

Some cities and counties now offer natural yard care pilot programs. You can ask neighbors if they would like to participate with you in one of these programs. Even if such a program isn't available locally, you can bring your neighbors together informally to share information.

Additional Tips

- ❖ Begin where they are. Remember that they have a different perspective on pesticides, probably because they don't know much about them. Begin your conversation gently.
- ❖ Avoid a holier than thou attitude. After all, perhaps there are things you do that annoy them!
- ❖ Don't lecture them, have a conversation. Give them a chance to talk.
- ❖ Listen to what they say. Don't get so wrapped up in planning your next point that you don't hear them.
- ❖ Keep it friendly, avoid an accusatory tone.
- ❖ Offer to bring them additional information, then follow up.
- ❖ Read the companion fact sheet "What's the problem with pesticides" to increase your knowledge on the issues.

Let your Pesticide Free Zone sign break the ice

If you put up a Pesticide Free Zone sign in your front lawn, your neighbors or friends may ask about it and that will get the conversation started. Your neighbors may perhaps feel defensive if they think that the sign was put up to get their attention specifically. Or they may just be curious about why you garden the way you do or how you control pests without chemicals. In any case, wait a couple of weeks after you put up the sign and see if anything happens. If it doesn't, you can always start a conversation yourself by pointing out your new sign. ■

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