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*By Julee Boan for ENVIRONMENT north*

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People in Thunder Bay, and most Canadians, take pride in having attractive property. Many of us, as part of lawn maintenance, use pesticides and herbicides - products developed to kill unwanted plants, insects and plant diseases.

However, there is increasing public awareness and concern about the potential health risks, especially to children and pets. As well, impacts on our environment, as these chemicals drain into river systems and lakes, are now better understood the public, research scientist and policy makers.

The concern of the general public over pesticide use arises from many unanswered questions, including:

- Potential adverse impacts of pesticides on human health (particularly for children);
- Involuntary exposure to pesticides (e.g. from herbicide applications on neighbouring lawns);
- Incomplete testing of pesticides, and the toxicity of inert ingredients in pesticides;
- Potential adverse impacts of pesticides on birds and other wildlife;
- Potential for environmental contamination, including water contamination; and
- Increasing resistance of some pests to pesticides.

Sceptics, especially those connected to the pesticide industry, say there is no need for concern. As with previous issues such as second-hand smoke, absolute proof of the link between human health and pesticide use may be a long time coming. However, there is a growing concern from health care providers that feel that there is enough evidence that cosmetic use of pesticides is not worth the risk.

Dr. Kelly Martin is an emergency room doctor at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal said, "children are ... at increased risk from pesticides". Martin is also an epidemiologist and a member of Health Canada's Pest Management Review Agency. "We have five or six good studies that show that if you use lawn pesticides on your lawn or garden one to four times a year your child has a five to six times increase of developing leukemia."

Dr. Louis Guillette, in a special series of lectures earlier this year for the School of Medicine at the University of Western Ontario said, "The use of these compounds just for cosmetic reasons, just because you don't want to make dandelion wine from your yard, I think is inappropriate." Based on his own scientific investigations, Guillette stated, "There's enough evidence that pesticides put children, wildlife and the ecosystem at risk. Just because you can go buy them at the local stores doesn't mean that is appropriate use," he said.



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Many communities have looked to their city council to enforce changes. Calgary, Vancouver, London, and Toronto have passed restrictive by-laws on cosmetic use of pesticides. Waterloo has gone as far as to virtually eliminate pesticides in its public spaces. Nine municipalities in Quebec have passed by-laws restricting use of pesticides by institutions and homeowners.

The Council of Newmarket, a municipality in Greater Toronto banned cosmetic pesticide use on lawns and in gardens on June 26, 2006. "I am doing this because I want to give my children — your children — a healthy, pesticide-free life", Councillor Joe Sponga announced at the council meeting, just before the sweeping ban passed 9-0.

Environment North supports a complete ban of cosmetic pesticide use in the Northwest region.

Residents should encourage their representatives on councils in various communities to enact by-laws to make this happen.

Typically, in the above cities and towns, gardening companies and households have been given one or even two years to make the transition.

Strong and healthy lawns and gardens are important. These goals can be accomplished by enriching soils, spreading compost or mulch, raising the height of our lawn mowers, sowing our lawns with grass seed, hand-weeding and watering properly. Deep-rooted lawns and healthy gardens crowd out weeds and resist insect damage.

There are many gardening books that will show you how to combine plants to increase pest resistance. Some sickly plants may simply be located in the wrong conditions.

Pesticides give an illusion that "the grass is greener". There are safe ways to keep our yards and gardens attractive without harmful consequences.