

Is suburban life better, or worse, chemically?

By Sherry Kahan
staff writer

Summer is coming up chemical in the suburbs. Lilies and freshly cut grass may smell delicious. But hardware and garden stores smell like chemical factories.

Green machines, part of one of the newest growth industries, ply the streets, stopping at lawns to spray forth a variety of herbicides and pesticides. Home gardeners bring home heavy packages of these products marked with words like grow, green, and easy. In smaller print at the bottom are warnings that the herbicide or pesticide may be toxic to dogs or fish.

Bugout, made by Greenview, states specifically "toxic to fish, birds and other wildlife," with the additional admonition "Keep out of any body of water."

In even smaller print on the packages is a list of ingredients, most of them with long, unpronounceable scientific names. It takes considerable effort to discover what is in these products. Most home owners, therefore, know little about the products they are using, or what effect they have on life around them.

"APPROXIMATELY 99 percent of all insect species are either neutral or beneficial," said Dr. Hilmar Moore, former instructor in the horticulture training program at the Waldorf Institute in Southfield. "When you use poison on a wide scale, you are poisoning all insects to kill that 1 percent. The insects you are trying to poison become progressively immune to the poison, and you have to use increasingly powerful poisons on them."

Hilmar takes pesticides seriously. "When you spray chemicals, use common sense," he advised. "Wear a mask, although a respirator is preferable. Keep children and pets out of harm's way."

In his opinion lawns could be kept healthy if a herbicide is used for a year only, followed by an organic rather than chemical fertilizer. He suggested that short grass cuttings be allowed to remain on the lawn as a source of nitrogen.

"It doesn't improve anyone's health to use these materials," said Paul Tamboulin, chemistry professor at Oakland University in Rochester. "All herbicides are on the dangerous list, but these are not particularly dangerous. But I have an uneasiness for any use of chemicals in the environment when there is no clearly defined need. People

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are addicted to a quick fix, but it may have a long-term disadvantage."

Tamboulin dials what he calls "the shotgun approach" of pesticides. He thinks a specific problem should be treated with a specific chemical.

Roger Sutherland, biology instructor at Schoolcraft College, bemoans the belief of many that if a little is good, a lot is much better. "With thousands and thousands of suburban dwellers using pesticides and herbicides, we probably apply more than the farmers do," he said.

A beekeeper, Sutherland worries about the death of the honey bee because of these chemicals. "One-third of the food supply of Michigan is indirectly or directly dependent on insect pollination," he said, "and the honey bee is the major pollinator."

"I WORRY ABOUT misuse of herbicides and pesticides," reported Michael Jost, a biologist at Michigan State University. "And we don't know what happens long range with the application of these chemicals. Our view is to see nature as a big struggle, but we should be living with it. We suppress certain organisms that have a useful job."

An example of such suppression can be seen in advertisements of the green companies to rid lawns of clover.

"Clover is definitely good for the soil of the lawn," said Jost. "It puts in nitrogen. You can then use less fertilizer. But green provides people with a feeling of contentment, and they get upset by the white clover flower."

KELLY WAZNEV, owner of Villa Lawn, pointed out that "this business is dictated by customers and users. They don't like clover. They want their lawn as green as the one next door."

Waznev indicated that most sprayers wear T-shirts and pants, that the company recommends they wear gloves when spraying insecticide. But clothing is left to the discretion of the driver.

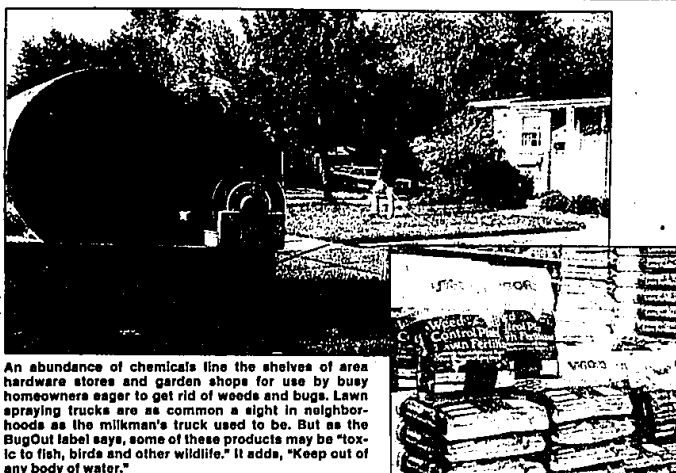
"It's very interesting in safety," he said. "To me, this is a good job. You're outside in the fresh air. We have increased our customer base by over 1,000 a year."

The herbicides he uses on lawns come to the firm pre-mixed. The chemicals are 2,4-D, dicamba, and MCPP, the chemical used by many lawn spraying companies.

"To say that use of chemicals for the control of pests is synonymous with poisoning the environment is a media hype term," said Dr. Roger Years, director of employee environmental health for Chem-Lawn in Columbus, Ohio, the firm that provides companies with these lawn products. It has an area branch in Novi. Asked about the herbicide, 2,4-D, which is part of the lawn mix, he said it has no environmental persistence.

"It breaks down into the environment, and does not accumulate as it goes through the food chain. It is not very toxic, and doesn't accumulate in a person as opposed to some chemical like PCB."

He added that it has been in use for 37 or 38 years.



An abundance of chemicals line the shelves of area hardware stores and garden shops for use by busy homeowners eager to get rid of weeds and bugs. Lawn spraying trucks are as common a sight in neighborhoods as the milkman's truck used to be. But as the BugOut label says, some of these products may be "toxic to fish, birds and other wildlife." It adds, "Keep out of any body of water."

THOSE WHO APPLY these products are advised to wear boots when spraying liquid material to minimize skin contact, he said. They "should wear a clean uniform every day to minimize unintentional exposure to chemicals." He added that there is no way to equate the exposure of employees who work 10 or 12 hours a day to the homeowner whose lawn receives chemicals four times a year.

Waldorf's Moore said that poison through the skin could cause problems such as skin disorders like chloracne, a severe rash, and go into the blood stream.

While some area veterinarians reported no problems with animals and herbicides and pesticides, two did. Dr. Lawrence Chuk of the Westland Veterinary Hospital noted that "not too many cases can we pinpoint as caused by herbicide, although occasionally we see a case of dermatitis associated with walking on a lawn."

But both he and Dr. Mary Beth Leininger of Plymouth Veterinary Hospital cautioned against allowing animals to get into a bag of weedkiller and eat it.

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