



'Safer' means just that to gardeners

By Earl Aronson
special writer

WHAT'S in a name? To gardeners, the name "Safer" means a line of non-toxic biodegradable products. An early slogan of the firm was: "The Safer Way — Naturally."

I recently visited the Newton, Mass., operation and its youthful president, Milton P. Wilkins, who said that all its products must be non-toxic, effective and biodegradable, and should not contaminate water supplies.

"You can spray, then eat fruit at harvest with no problem," he said. "The products are designed to control house plant, garden and forest pests, and quickly disintegrate."

"There is growing mainstream concern about the environment," said Fred N. DeFinis, marketing manager. "Gardeners want safe alternatives to chemicals — less toxic, more natural pesticides that are easy to use, quickly effective and long-lasting."

THE COMPANY was founded in

weeder's guide

Earl Aronson

Canada in the mid-1970s by two scientists working to help the Forest Service control pests environmentally.

They isolated fatty acids, byproducts of vegetables, oil, and meat processing. In 1980, Safer was established in the United States. Its main product is still insecticidal soap.

Company executives said fatty acids are a large group of compounds that disrupt the cell membranes of targeted pests — including aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies, mites, pear slugs, earwigs and crickets — but do not harm humans, pets or "good" insects.

When insecticidal soap comes in contact with an insect, Wilkins said, it enters the body through the insect's cuticle, disrupting the cell membranes and causing desiccation and death.

There is no known example of an insect developing resistance to Safer fat-

ty acid insecticides, Wilkins said.

AMONG THE newer products developed by the research staff are Early Alert reusable insect traps, for Japanese beetles, houseflies, thrips and other pests. They work "without the use of harmful chemicals or poisons," Wilkins said.

"Our exclusive Biolure time-released lures (the traps) spare beneficial insects, are environmentally safe and last five months without any major change or loss in attraction efficiency," DeFinis said.

The traps are made of a fluorescent yellow plastic that attracts and kills the bugs and, according to Wilkins, are "safe around children and pets."

Another new product is Early Alert Trapstix, which catches fungus gnats and other pests that infest house plants. Trapstix is inserted into plant containers and signals the need to apply insecticidal soap.

AMONG THE company's other products are moss and algae killers, fungicides, herbicides and plant leaf cleaners, as well as a plant protectant that discourages moisture loss and re-

duces needle drop of Christmas trees.

DeFinis said that his products "contain no petrochemicals, so they're safe to use around people, pets and in the environment."

"Toxicity tests show that Safer's insecticidal soap does not harm birds or wildlife; other tests demonstrate that it spares beneficial insects such as lady beetles and honeybees," he said.

The company's all-natural pesticides are "completely biodegradable and leave plants with a clean, natural fragrance," he said.

One of the most recent products from Safer — the largest dealer in non-toxic natural garden and household products, according to Wilkins — is SharpShooter weed and grass killer.

This biodegradable product does not require soil sterilization after use, and the area may be replanted in 48 hours.

(Earl Aronson is the garden writer for Associated Press. For his "Guide to House Plants," send \$1.50 to: House Plants, AP Newsfeatures, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10020. Any questions about gardening must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.)

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Garden mulch

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decompose in one season and improve the soil. While in place, these and other mulches keep vegetables clean and minimize weeding and watering.

5. Stones and other inorganic mulches: Gravel, river stones, sheet plastic and various synthetic fabrics all have some value as mulch — black plastic is great for tomatoes — but won't improve soil quality as organics will.

Instant flowers

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COLOR IN THE SHADE: If your garden doesn't get much sunshine, don't despair. Lots of flowers thrive and bloom even in deep shade. The most popular flower for shade is impatiens, but consider others like primroses, tuberous begonias, and hostas.

PREPARING THE SOIL: Till the soil to a depth of six to eight inches and mix in a slow-release fertilizer. If needed (at new home sites especially) add soil improvers like peat moss, compost or manure. This can be done by hand, but using a modern power tool.