

Suburban Gardener

Eco-System Knowledge A Must For Gardeners

By BETTY FRANKEL

"Ecology" is everybody's business, but the gardener is especially involved because he is directly concerned with soil, water, air, plants and all the other things that make up the natural environment. Horticulture, the art of growing plants, deals with the manipulation of these environmental factors, so it is important for the gardener to understand our "eco-system" and to know what his own

dening practices do to it. Barry Commoner, a University of Washington microbiologist who has been called the Paul Revere of ecology, has been rousing the public to environmental dangers for several years now. He and other ecologists have likened the earth to a huge space ship. It is a closed system. Nothing can be added and nothing removed.

by Commoner, called "The Closing Circle," he has come up with some basic rules of ecology. Everything is connected to everything else. Everything has to go somewhere. Nature knows best. There is no such thing as a free lunch. (we pay for everything.) Barry Commoner depicts life on earth as a vast cycle

that began when the first green plants appeared on earth. The green plants converted the waste of primitive organisms into fresh organic material that became part of a complex food chain until it was broken down and used again by green plants.

MAN HAS broken the circle of life. He has produced plastic materials that don't break down. He has destroyed eco-systems and habitats. He has removed resources from where they were concentrated in the earth and after a brief use scattered them far and wide. Man broke the cycle, Commoner states, not because of biological need but because of the social organizations he has devised to "conquer" nature.

The gardener should know what the fertilizers and insecticides and herbicides he uses will do to the cycle of life. George Tamboulan, Oakland University professor of chemistry and director of environmental studies, recently told a local garden club that a garden center is like a "drug" store, but unlike the drug store which is in the charge of a trained and licensed pharmacist, the salesman in the garden center generally does not know very much about the chemicals he sells.

"Worse" chemicals are sold in the garden center than in the drug store. In fact, stated Tamboulan, because they are so dangerous, the drug store would not be allowed to sell many of the products sold in the garden shop.

RECYCLING is another concept the gardener should understand - and practice. Packaging, materials and other solid wastes need to be recycled. Over 50 per cent of the trash we pay to have removed is packaging. Tamboulan calls this trash "urban ore" and feels that the time will come when we will have to reclaim the valuable minerals that are in it.

Organic wastes will have to be recycled, too. For years the city of Milwaukee has been processing sewerage and converting it into an excellent garden fertilizer called "Milorganite." Other communities should do this, too.

The homeowner should be recycling the products from his garden. As plants grow they use nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other elements that are in the soil.

If the grass clippings and autumn leaves are removed the soil becomes depleted. If the leaves and clippings were left, as they are in nature in a meadow or forest, they would return to the soil the things they had removed from it.

The gardener can keep his yard tidy and still recycle by putting grass clippings and leaves on a compost pile and after they have broken down into usable humus spread this on the lawn or work it into garden beds.

THERE IS a new device on the market to help gardeners recycle. This is a shredder machine that has a rotary blade and a big hopper into which leaves, stems, plants, twigs and other garden debris is dropped. The shredded material is blown from a tube at the bottom.

Ray Boardman, former executive secretary of the Michigan Horticultural Society, recently demonstrated how his new shredder reduced a cumbersome pile of clippings and plants to a small pile of finely shredded material. It is estimated that there was about an 80 per cent reduction in volume.

Anne Heatter, another area gardener, has been experimenting with grinding vegetable peelings and such waste in her kitchen blender and pouring the resultant "soup" on her garden beds.

Tamboulan has suggested that people who are concerned about the ecology and the environment but don't know how to do anything about it could start by reading some of the publications that have articles on ecology. These include Audubon Magazine and the Sierra Club magazine and a publication called "Not Man Apart" put out by "Friends of the Earth." There are numerous books on ecology are available at local libraries.

"Earth Alive," a local ecology group, further suggests that people use only what they need and re-use it. Use as little paper and plastic as possible. Save newspapers, glass bottles and metal cans for reprocessing. Use non-polluting laundry products. Conserve water and electric power.

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