

After the Ban by Nancy Seppala

On Earth Day, April 22, 2009, Ontario passed its ban on cosmetic pesticides. This law has banned the sale of about 250 various pesticide products which previously had been available to the home gardener. Organic gardeners probably welcomed this new set of laws and did not change gardening practices at all. But those seeking the fastest way to wipe out bugs and weeds might be having problems maintaining perennial beds and rolling green lawns without a little help from their pesticide friends.

If you have been one of these people dependent on a quick fix, don't despair. Gardening without pesticides can be done and beautiful gardens and lawns can be grown. But it may take a little more time and effort and definitely a change of attitude. Here are some environmentally friendly tips for growing healthy, lush and attractive plants in areas where pesticides had been used extensively – lawns, gardens and backyard fruit trees.

In the first place, if you are used to absolutely weed free lawns, consider diversifying your selection of lawn plants. A blend of grasses can include perennial rye and fescue grasses in addition to the usual Kentucky blue grass. A nursery near Orillia has developed lawn seed containing a mix of seven fine fescue grasses which grow in sun to shade and because of their finer blades and deep roots, require much less water than Kentucky blue grass lawns. Another company sells a product which is a mix of grass varieties, legumes (clover) and yarrow. This forms a lush green mat which does not go dormant and is white grub resistant.



Pesticide Free Lawn. Photo by Nancy Seppala

Other ways to help your lawn are to top dress with organic matter in spring and aerate in fall, especially if your lawn is compacted or on a clay base. Corn gluten meal is a natural fertilizer which provides nitrogen but also has a herbicidal effect since it inhibits the root

formation of germinating plants. Apply it in spring (when the forsythia blooms) to fight crab grass and in fall to impede germination of dandelion seeds and other weed seeds which have blown into your yard. If you intend to overseed, you will need to wait six weeks to apply corn gluten meal since it will interfere with grass seed germination as well. For complete information on its application, check the City of Ottawa website on lawn care.

Garden beds should have a diversity of shrubs and perennials. Many insects attack specific plants and if you have lots of variety, some plants will do well even while others have holes munched in their leaves. Learn which plants in your garden thrive and which ones barely survive. For many people easy to grow perennials include *Polygonatum* (Solomon's Seal), *Geranium macrorrhizum*, *Achillea* (Yarrow), *Rudbeckia* (Black-eyed Susan), and *Aesclepias tuberosa* (Butterfly Milkweed) as well as some splendid native ornamental grasses such as *Panicum* (Switch Grass) and *Schizachyrium* (Little Blue Stem). Eliminate plants that require constant care to keep them pest and disease free.

If you do need to fight soft-bodied insects, for example aphids on roses, blast them off with a strong jet of water from your hose. Insecticidal soap is an approved pesticide. Since it needs to be sprayed directly onto the offending insect you should be able to avoid killing beneficial insects as well.

A key component of all gardens should be mulch. Spreading 5 to 7 cm (2 to 3 inches) of mulch, especially organic mulch such as shredded pine, cedar or disease-free leaves achieves many purposes. If the mulch covers weed seeds, it will inhibit many of them from germinating. It also keeps plants from drying out as quickly as they might in the bare earth and it maintains a more even soil temperature. This should produce a less stressed plant which should be able to withstand pest and disease attacks more easily. Organic mulch will also increase soil fertility as it decomposes.



Mulched Garden by Nancy Seppala

Many home gardeners have found it difficult to grow fruit without using pesticides. For example, apple scab and maggots can be a big problem. While scab can often be peeled off an apple, nobody wants to bite into a worm! Cultural practices to prevent disease become more important than ever. If you want to grow apples, search out the scab resistant varieties of trees. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has some excellent information on this topic and many others concerning growing fruit trees. Pruning will open up the canopy to the sun and improve air circulation. Clean up all diseased leaf and apple debris whenever possible to prevent insects and fungal spores from over wintering. Hang sticky red balls which mimic apples and which will catch flies attempting to lay eggs. Continue to inspect your trees and stop the problems before they get out of hand.

The Ontario pesticide ban has been a difficult transition for some but years ago gardeners managed without chemicals and they can now as well. Attitudes need to change. It's time to accept a lawn with a variety of plants and an occasional weed, a few holes in the hosta leaves or a less than perfect apple. Ultimately the benefits of more chemical-free gardens will be evident everywhere. In Joni Mitchell's words, it's time to "put away the D.D.T. now," and accept "spots on our apples" as long as we're left "with the birds and the bees." (Joni Mitchell, Big Yellow Taxi, 1970)

Tips Sidebar

Useful resources related to Ontario's ban on pesticides

- <http://www.additupontario.ca/en/toxics/gardens/index.php> (The Ontario Ministry of the Environment website)
- www.dowhatyoucan.ca (gives the location of hazardous waste depots near you)
- <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/index.html> (The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs offers a wealth of horticultural information)
- http://www.organiclandscape.org/en/Fact_Sheets_28.html (The Organic Landscape Alliance offers information on organic horticulture, lawn care and landscaping)
- http://www.ottawa.ca/residents/healthy_lawns/lawns/alternatives/index_en.html (The city of Ottawa website)
- www.mgottawa.mgoi.ca (Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton website)