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Dalton McGuinty killed my shrub

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OK, so maybe the premier didn't have a direct hand in the death of the euonymus bush on my front yard. An infestation of dreaded euonymus scale took care of that.

But Dalton McGuinty did prevent me from taking action to save that shrub, which I had lovingly trimmed over the years into something resembling a piano. His was a crime of omission.

According to my local nursery expert (who spoke on condition of anonymity), several federally approved remedies could have saved my shrub. But while folks elsewhere can make use of them, not me — thanks to McGuinty's 2009 ban on cosmetic pesticides.

It's worth pointing out that every chemical banned by the provincial government was previously approved by scientists at the federal government's pest management regulatory agency. The ban was motivated by the "precautionary principle" that stirs up fear of minuscule or unknown risks in the absence of scientific evidence. In defending his ban, the premier frequently mentioned the need to protect children from such risks. But what of the unintended consequences?

Judging from the shape of every other euonymus bush in my neighbourhood, the shrub may be on its way to complete extinction. Scale has arrived and there's now no way to cure it. (As an aside, the nursery recommended I burn the infected bush to stop the infestation from spreading, but of course I'm not allowed to do that either.)

Unfortunately, euonymus bushes are probably not the only thing likely to disappear in the wake of McGuinty's pesticide ban. What else is on the path to extinction? How about natural grass sports fields.

As little as a decade ago, you could count the number of artificial sports fields owned by Ontario municipalities or school boards on one hand. This year, according to industry sources, there will be over 100 in operation.

Such a phenomenon is highly visible in our region. Last year Waterloo replaced grass soccer pitches at RIM Park with artificial fields. The University of Guelph recently installed an artificial football field on campus. And this spring at Woodside Park, Kitchener unveiled the first two in a series of planned soccer field conversions.

We can expect many more fields to go from real grass to fake in the years to come.

There are lots of good economic reasons to favour artificial grass over the real thing. As Greg Hummel, manager of park planning, development and operations at Kitchener explains, a grass field tops out at about 450 hours of sports activities per year. "After that, you are basically destroying the turf," he says.

On the other hand, synthetic grass can be programmed for as many as 3,000 hours per year, with a big benefit coming from use during the shoulder seasons of spring and fall, when grass must be left dormant.

Crunching the numbers, synthetic grass costs more to install, but delivers substantially more playing time.

But what explains the recent swing to artificial? One reason that cannot be overlooked is that the pesticide ban has made it impossible to nurse damaged grass fields back to health. "Being able to spray a field was an easy and affordable quick step," says Hummel. With no way to save fields that become infested with weeds, the sensible solution has been to switch to plastic turf.

And yet we shouldn't necessarily celebrate the disappearance of grass sports fields as part of the inevitable march of progress. As Hummel acknowledges, almost everyone prefers to play on the real thing.

Further, natural grass offers some important benefits that have been overlooked in the rush to ersatz grass. Real turf is unsurpassed at collecting and filtering rain water. It also acts as a natural digester, consuming any nasty bacteria that may be spat, bled or vomited on it. Bacteria on artificial fields stay there until washed away.

The presence of bacteria has become a major issue in Texas, which boasts a large number of artificial football fields due to its hot, dry climate. In 2007, for example, Austin, Texas high school footballer Boone Baker caught the feared methicillin-resistant staphylococuccus aureus after scrapping his knee on his school's artificial turf and was left temporarily paralyzed.

For this reason, all artificial fields now need to be regularly sprayed with a powerful disinfectant.

It's certainly not my intention to create panic about artificial fields. The risk of picking up a staph infection while playing on synthetic grass is quite remote. About as remote, in fact, as the risk posed by regulated pesticides when properly and responsibly used.

Rather, the point to make here is entirely ironic. Environmentalists who tirelessly advocated for a pesticide ban in order to create a more "natural" environment have instead ushered in a world filled with artificial grass that must be cleaned with industrial-strength cleansers. And in attempting to protect kids from minuscule risks posed by regulated pesticides, we have as a consequence exposed them to different and equally minuscule risks.

Oh, and how do you throw out a football field-sized piece of carpet?

Perhaps the environmental movement should be looking for ways to preserve real grass fields instead of replacing them all with plastic. Pesticides do have a use.

Peter Shawn Taylor is editor-at-large of Maclean's. He lives in Waterloo. His house is the one without a shrub in front. His column appears every other Thursday.