

PortlandTribune

Two more city parks go pesticide-free

Northwest environmental coalition presses city to expand program

BY PETER KORN

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Nobody ever said sustainability came easy.

Take parks. Under prodding from Eugene's Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, Portland Parks and Recreation four years ago started a pilot program to make three city parks pesticide-free. This week, parks and recreation added two new neighborhood parks to the list.

The original three pesticide-free parks were Lair Hill in Southwest Portland, Sewallcrest in Southeast Portland and Arbor Lodge in North Portland. Newly added to the list are Hillside Park in Northwest Portland and Midland Park in Southeast Portland.

The city is able to keep these parks pesticide-free through the use of coalition volunteers. The nonprofit has organized 244 volunteers who have put in a combined 1,374 hours removing weeds at Lair Hill, Sewallcrest and Arbor Lodge parks so the city did not need to resort to pesticides.

Using hand weeding instead of pesticides, and volunteers instead of parks employees, is effective, sustainable, and, well, not cheap.

City support of volunteers

It turns out the parks department uses two types of pesticides on most parks. According to John Reed, the agency's integrative pest management coordinator, pesticide use has always been kept to a minimum in neighborhood parks. A few herbicides are used around trees and shrubs, and at the bottoms of fences, Reed said.

Reed estimated that each year an average five-acre neighborhood park in Portland gets about 28 ounces of Roundup and six ounces of Surflan. It costs about \$371 to keep weeds out of some parks. Pesticide-free parks, on the other hand, come with a surprising price tag — about \$3,600 in annual maintenance costs, and \$9,455 in startup costs for each new park.

Volunteer labor doesn't come cheap, according to Reed.

"It takes a lot of work to make sure volunteers show up and are supported," he said.

That includes parks department employees hauling weeds collected by the volunteers, and walking through parks to make sure weeds are under control, Reed said.

Not all of the weeds in the pesticide-free parks were hand-pulled. Volunteers also used propane-fueled weed burners to scorch hard-to-pull weeds, particularly on baseball fields. That makes Reed wonder if the propane, and its resultant carbon emissions, aren't almost as bad as the environmental damage from the pesticides he would otherwise use. And then there's the carbon emissions from cars



A pesticide-free park sign at Sewallcrest Park in Southeast Portland.

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volunteers drive to the parks to do their weeding.

A park with no pesticides

One of the three pilot program parks did not go the full three years pesticide-free. That's because at Sewallcrest Park someone found a nest of bees or wasps or some stinging insects in the park play structure. The insects were considered a public health problem, so the parks department sprayed insecticide to take care of the problem, something covered by the document used to establish the program.

"It's all tradeoffs," Reed said.

Haley Smith, volunteer coordinator at Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, said the two pesticides used by the parks department pose dangers to children and pets and have been linked to cancer and reproductive problems.

Testing has found both chemicals in the Clackamas River, indicating they leach out into water sources, she said.

Reed said the pesticide-free program serves a purpose, though not necessarily the obvious one, given the low level of pesticide use the city already enforces at neighborhood parks.

"It's not a demonstrably safer or less toxic park," Reed said. "There is a small group of people out there who like the idea of a park that has no pesticides whatsoever."

Parks and Recreation and the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides will host two celebrations announcing the start of the pesticide-free programs at Hillside and Midland Parks. The Midland Park celebration will take place 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 11. At Hillside, the celebration will take place 1 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 12.

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