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## Organic pesticides ineffective in parks

*Cold, wet spring allowed weeds to get upper hand*

By Vickie Aldous

Ashland Daily Tidings

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Organic pesticides proved largely ineffective at controlling weeds in Ashland parks in 2011, staff reported this week, one year after the parks department decided to forgo the use of most chemical pesticides.

Organic pesticides generally have to be applied during warm, dry weather. But a cold, wet spring slowed the use of the products, allowing weeds to grow and go to seed, parks staff said.

Workers also were hampered by parks rules that they post notices about planned spraying of organic pesticides 48 hours beforehand. Cool, damp weather would return, and the workers were not able to spray. Then they would have to post notices again and hope for warm, dry weather in two days.

"It became an exercise in futility," Parks and Recreation Director Don Robertson said.

Eventually many parks workers stopped trying to use the organic pesticides, said parks Horticulturist Anne Thayer.

Despite the troubled start for the use of organic pesticides — which include herbicides and insecticides — parks staff and commissioners are not ready to give up on the products.

This week commissioners unanimously authorized workers to use organic pesticides without posting 48-hour notices. Instead, workers will post informational signs about the products they are using only during the time they are applying them.

Organic pesticides contain ingredients such as citrus oil, castor oil and clove oil. They are considered to be safer for people and the environment than chemical pesticides, and can be used on organic gardens and farms.

Parks commissioners this week unanimously authorized the use of chemical pesticides on the baseball and softball infields at North Mountain Park and Hunter Park.

Weeds took over the dirt areas of the infields in 2011, creating an uneven and unsafe surface. That presents a liability issue for the parks department, Robertson said.

Parks workers and volunteers from sports teams fought the weeds through methods such as roto-tilling the dirt and raking, parks Superintendent Bruce Dickens said.

"Now they're fairly well cleaned up, but it's past the season. We dealt with it pretty much all season and the weeds were pretty much out of control," he said.

The commission did not authorize chemical pesticide use on the dirt tracks that follow the outfield fences. A motion to allow chemical pesticide use on the dirt tracks failed on a 2-3 vote.

Parks commissioners hope that the weather will be more conducive for applying organic pesticides this spring.

"I'm not sure it was a fair year and all the resources that were potentially available were not used," Commissioner Rick Landt said of 2011. "That's just the way it is with weather. I would like to see a better test."

The parks department had budgeted an extra \$10,000 for staff labor and supplies for organic pesticide application in 2011.

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It spent \$1,841 on organic herbicides, the major category for pesticides used in parks. Workers spent 35 hours valued at \$990 to apply those herbicides, for a total of \$2,831 spent on supplies and labor in 2011.

In contrast, the parks department spent \$169 on chemical herbicides in 2010 and spent 214 hours valued at \$6,054 applying those chemicals — for a total of \$6,223, according to parks data.

Spending on organic herbicides was higher in 2011 because workers can dilute chemical herbicides with more water before application. Chemical pesticides can be bought in smaller, concentrated quantities, Thayer said.

The amount of labor spent to apply organic herbicides in 2011 dropped significantly because of the cold, wet spring. Also, many parks workers gave up on trying to use the products, Thayer said.

"I was really hopeful that this would work out better as a citizen and as someone who doesn't use synthetics personally," Commissioner Jim Lewis said. "People I know don't want them used. Volunteers were reticent about going to areas that might have been sprayed to do weed pulling because of the whole toxics problem."

One positive side effect of the switch to organic pesticides and the late 2010 hiring of a volunteer coordinator was that the parks department saw a surge in volunteerism.

Volunteers contributed 7,576 hours of labor in 2011, up from 4,946 hours in 2010, according to parks figures.

About half of the volunteer hours in 2011 were devoted to parks maintenance, said parks Volunteer Coordinator Lori Ainsworth.

Volunteers focused a lot of work on Scenic Park, one of Ashland's newer parks.

"It wanted to revert to its natural state," Ainsworth said.

Near the Dog Park, volunteer efforts to prevent weed growth with a layer of cardboard topped by mulch proved more effective than organic pesticides, Robertson said.

In the Dog Park parking area, parks workers tried to burn weeds along concrete and asphalt with propane torches, but that was not effective. Weeds grew back and had to be chopped down, Robertson said.

Ainsworth's efforts to mobilize volunteers were more effective at combatting weeds than organic pesticides, Dickens said.

"The non-synthetics failed to a large degree," he said. "It was a waste of product as well as staff time to go out and spray those weeds — whereas what Lori did cleared up the weeds."

At their next regular meeting, commissioners will discuss whether to direct staff to prepare an alternate pesticide plan for consideration in early 2013 should organic pesticides prove ineffective in 2012.

The commission meets at 7 p.m. March 26 in the Ashland Civic Center Council Chambers, 1175 E. Main St.

As an alternate plan, staff members have proposed a tiered system in which chemical pesticides would be allowed on some land maintained by the parks department.

The department has contracts for grounds maintenance at Ashland schools, Ashland Community Hospital, city of Ashland property, road medians and the Ashland Municipal Airport. The department has been adhering to its chemical pesticide-free policy on those lands.

However, the department has fielded some complaints about weeds.

Parks staff have proposed careful use of chemical pesticides on most of the non-parkland and for North Mountain Park and Hunter Park baseball and softball infields.

Chemical pesticides would not be used on school grounds. The only maintenance parks workers do there now is mowing, Dickens said.

Chemical pesticides would be allowed to control noxious weeds and weeds that pose a fire hazard, under the parks staff proposal.

Staff reporter Vickie Aldous can be reached at 541-479-8199 or [valdous@yahoo.com](mailto:valdous@yahoo.com).

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