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Heart & Soul

Passionately opposed to pesticides

Susan Pinker

Montreal

Dr. June Irwin has whittled her routine down to the basics: she is the sole physician in a busy dermatology practice, and on her farm she tends to the daily needs of more than 100 chickens, 29 sheep and 25 geese.

And when she's not examining rashes or keeping coyotes out of the henhouse, Irwin focuses on her other preoccupation: documenting the effects of pesticide exposure on health. "That's what's good about living on a farm," she says, leaning on her shepherd's crook. "You learn to follow the rules of nature."

The same rules are at the root of Irwin's environmental activism. Her 32-hectare farm is located in Hudson, a community of 3000 people about 60 km west of Montreal. There, Irwin's noisy barnyard is surrounded by picturesque country homes, hobby farms and a golf course, all framed to advantage by emerald-green, weed-free lawns. But when Irwin thinks about that perfect grass, she sees red. "Anyone could take a truck and spray these toxic chemicals — there's nothing to prevent them," she said during an interview, standing surrounded by her flock of sheep.

Irwin keeps close tabs on studies that link the lawn-care chemicals available on store shelves with disease. She then publicizes the information in letters, speeches and petitions. "When it comes to pesticide use in Canada," she says, "we are a human experiment. And no records are being kept."

Irwin first concluded that there was a connection between the use of lawn-care products containing pesticides and some of the medical problems she was seeing in patients in 1986. Since then she has mounted a nonstop letter-writing campaign to newspapers, municipalities and government ministries, drawing attention to what she considers a grave health risk and to what she calls the "free-for-all" situation surrounding pesticide use.

Her efforts resulted in a 1991 bylaw banning residential pesticides in Hudson, the first ruling of its type in Quebec. She succeeded even though residents of neighbouring suburbs on the West Island of Montreal had previously used more lawn chemicals than any other part of the country. Since the bylaw passed in Hudson, many neighbouring communities have followed suit, either severely limiting pesticide use or banning it outright.

Irwin's farm is reached by driving to one end of Hudson's main road. She instructs visitors to look for a mailbox with an

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orange string tied around it, because her address isn't on it. "I have certain priorities in my life, and a new mailbox isn't one of them," she says. "Anyway, I rarely have visitors. I don't have time."

But the basics of life don't mean all work and no play. Irwin likes to keep her hens happy with freshly cut dandelion greens and bits of pumpkin. She routinely takes her sheep — they have shaggy dreadlocks because she considers shearing traumatic — for a walk over the hill to Finnegan's flea market. That's where she barter farm produce for antiques to furnish her medical office. "Patients call to see if I'm there, and then just come over. I operate in a free spirit. They learn from watching others to just put their [medicare] card down on the desk and wait." Irwin works without a receptionist so that she can devote more resources to environmental causes.

"I admire her for being such a maverick," says patient Stephanie Whittaker, another vocal opponent of pesticide use. Whittaker admits that she once called an exterminator to deal with carpenter ants in her walls, and then she told all to her doctor. "I confessed to her as if she were a priest and she responded, 'You, of all people!'"

Although Whittaker felt suitably ashamed, she was also appreciative. "The world does not have enough passionate people like her."



Figure. **Dr. June Irwin: "You learn to follow the rules of nature."** Photo by: Yvon Latreille photo

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