

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Patricia Dawn Robertson

Hazards of the mighty pesticide wand

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It's harvest season here on the Prairies. Between digging up batches of my organic beets, I'm dealing with the side effects of pesticide abuse.

When I was out for my morning run recently, I encountered Groundskeeper Willie near the local nursing home. He sported a massive pesticide tank and clasped the spray wand with his bare hands. I wheezed, turned in the other direction and shouted over my shoulder: "This town is wacky about weeds!"

"It sure is," he replied without a trace of irony.

I lurched home, chest tight, as my sense of indignation mounted. I vowed to pack an inhaler next time. Gone was the promise of fresh, clean country air featured in country real estate come-ons.

Never mind the controversial gun registry. What about the hazards of the spray gun? It's not just the rampant conspiracy theories and the long-gun debate that divides urban and rural Canada; it's also the mighty pesticide wand.

Although Saskatchewan boasts the highest number of organic producers per capita in North America, we have no cosmetic pesticide spraying legislation. Those most at risk – asthmatics, dogs, and small children – are forced to run the toxic gauntlet of aggressive sprayers every time they leave the house.

The whole province is Round-Up ready. It leaves indolent sprayers more time to sprawl in front of their widescreens to cackle at *Hiccups* and *Dan for Mayor*.

Can we trace this weed obsession to Saskatchewan's agricultural roots? That simplistic argument makes the whole region one giant farm operation and its hapless residents mere fodder for some sci-fi terrarium experiment.

Finally, this spring, after extensive lobbying by local activists, Regina designated three city parks pesticide-free as a test case. The rest of the province remains on a stoic mission to eliminate all weeds – even if it makes them all sick and out of step with the rest of Canada.

Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick are all provincewide no-go zones for cosmetic spraying. And I can hear my neighbours' snarky retorts now, as they obstinately shout over the back fence when I tell them that, "Well, Patricia, why don't you move there?"

As urban sodbusters frequent farmers markets and plaintively ask small producers, "Are these strawberries organic?" their polar opposite, the retired industrial farmer, is on a misguided mission to perfect his lawn and garden.

Pesticide spraying is the smoking habit of our era. You don't have to be a yurt dweller or a Birkenstock-wearing Utne Reader subscriber to support a ban on cosmetic spraying. Even the mainstream Canadian Cancer Society has declared cosmetic pesticide use a health hazard.

As an asthmatic who gardens organically, I've paid a social price for my pesticide rebellion. Just last month, the bylaws-guy-turned-paparazzo was boldly standing on my sidewalk with a digital video camera recording my yard for a possible bylaw violation. Big Brother was taping the long grass lodged between my raspberry canes because Wakaw has retrograde bylaws prohibiting weed growth and unsightly tall grass.

I can be quietly cooking meth on my kitchen stove but as long as my weeds are controlled, I'll be left alone. It's *Breaking Bad* meets *Lawn and Order*.

In November, American organic activist Maria Rodale will appear at TCU Place in Saskatoon to lecture the locals. Let's hope she can convert more of us to the organic cause. Ms. Rodale will probably encounter the same resistance as the hypnotist did in Wakaw when he tried to solicit volunteers to come up on stage and cluck like a chicken for him.

Why can't they exile these pesticide sprayers to the *Island of Dr. Moreau*? They should have to all live together in their toxic soup while the rest of us breathe easy.

Stephen Harper, instead of persecuting Canada's listless pot smokers with tougher laws, why don't you criminalize cosmetic pesticide spraying? If you do, I'll send along some of my organic pickled beets for you and the family to enjoy.

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