

## Ontario joins the movement to make lawns and gardens green

March 19, 2009 - The discovery by Swiss chemist Paul Mueller in 1939 that DDT kills insect "pests" was hailed as a breakthrough. Dr. Mueller went on to win a Nobel Prize in 1948 for his work, and DDT became the most widely used pesticide in the world during the 1950s. Years later, scientists learned that DDT is "biomagnified" up the food chain, harming fish, birds, humans, and other life.

Did we learn from that? The use of chemical pesticides increased by more than 600 per cent in the last half of the 20th century. Ten years into the 21st century, we still pour millions of litres of harmful pesticides onto our food, schoolyards, lawns, and managed forests. Much of that ends up in our air and water – and us. All Canadians carry pesticides in their bodies.

But this may be changing. We still use a lot of pesticides, usually for reasons less important than killing disease-carrying insects. We spray plenty of toxic chemicals around thinking it will keep lawns and gardens looking pretty. These pesticides are referred to as "cosmetic pesticides". The good news is that Ontario is the latest Canadian province to recognize that risking human and ecological health for the negligible benefits provided by cosmetic pesticides is foolish.

Under Ontario's Cosmetic Pesticides Ban Act, more than 250 pesticides will be removed from the province's store shelves by the end of April. Quebec is the only other province to have banned these pesticides, but Prince Edward Island has announced plans for a ban, New Brunswick is considering one, and more than 100 municipalities, including Vancouver, Halifax, and Brandon, have bans in place.

The Ontario law is something the David Suzuki Foundation, along with a range of health and environmental organizations, has been pushing for. It's recognition that caring for the environment is also about caring for our health. But there's more to be done – and the bans that are in place may be threatened.

To start, the Ontario law does not apply to golf courses, and some restrictions will not take effect for another two years.

And the chemical industry isn't sitting back while governments move to protect their citizens. Dow AgroSciences, a division of U.S.-based Dow Chemical, has served notice to the Canadian government that it plans to challenge Quebec's ban on the herbicide 2,4-D under the North American Free Trade Agreement. Although Dow argues that 2,4-D has not been proven unsafe, some research shows that it may pose risks to human immune, reproductive, and endocrine systems and that it may increase the risk of cancer. Governments in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Kuwait have banned 2,4-D because of concerns about its effects on human health and the environment.

Another problem with pesticides is that they don't discriminate. They may kill some "pests" but they often kill beneficial plants and animals as well. So, using pesticides on lawns and gardens is a band-aid solution, as the key to a healthy lawn or garden is to ensure that the soils, plants, and beneficial insects and animals are healthy. Ironically, lawns and gardens that become chemically dependent become more susceptible to pests and disease over time and are more likely to suffer from drought and temperature extremes. Today, even in areas where the cosmetic pesticides aren't banned, most lawn and garden care companies will offer organic options. And many stores have voluntarily pulled harmful pesticides off their shelves.

The bans are a great start, and we hope to see more provinces get on board. But they must also come with enforcement and education. Education programs are the best way to show people how easy it is to have healthy lawns and gardens without using harmful pesticides. These can be combined with programs to show how to have attractive yards using less water.

The bans also show that governments will put the interests of citizens ahead of industrial interests if people speak up. The public has led the way in getting these unnecessary chemicals off the store shelves and off our lawns. We've seen ample evidence through a contest launched by my foundation, called David Suzuki Digs My Garden. It allows participants to share stories, photos, and tips about pesticide-free gardening. The response has been great. People from every part of Canada have told us how easy and satisfying it is to grow healthy gardens without using harmful chemicals.

It truly is a growing movement, and we can only hope that as it blossoms and blooms, it will lead to even more discussion about the role of chemicals in the environment.

2,4-D research  
<http://www.pesticide.org/24D.pdf>

David Suzuki Digs My Garden  
<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/NatureChallenge/GardenContest/>

Ontario Cosmetic Pesticides Ban Act  
<http://news.ontario.ca/ene/en/2009/03/ontarios-cosmetic-pesticides-ban.html>

Organizations supporting Ontario's pesticides ban  
<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/files/SWAG/Health/OntarioPesticideBan.pdf>