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British Columbia releases most detailed study of so-called "cosmetic pesticides" which recommends no ban on most products; plus busting a number of old garden myths!

by Art Drysdale

by **Art Drysdale**email: art@artdrysdale.com

Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has renovated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over two radio stations: Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays and CD98.9 FM out of Norfolk County at 11:40 AM weekdays.

Art also has his own website at <http://www.artdrysdale.com>

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Eight shots from our garden here in Parksville. Above, Water Hawthorne (*Aponogetum distachyus*) is said to

Again this week, I am repeating two items from earlier in the year—two that received major feedback after they were published. The first one here is from May 17th and has to do with the British Columbia study into the possible banning of cosmetic pesticides. No other province or other jurisdiction examined the entire question in the detail that B.C. did.

On June 2nd last year, in its third session, the Legislative Assembly of the B.C. Government struck a Special Committee on Cosmetic Pesticides. On Opening Day of the fourth session, October 3, 2011, the Legislative Assembly reappointed the Special Committee on Cosmetic Pesticides, "to examine, inquire into and make recommendations with respect to the elimination of the unnecessary use of pesticides in British Columbia and to conduct consultations on this issue with the public and key stakeholders, by any means the Special Committee considers appropriate."

The report was released in the B.C. Legislature on Friday May 17th. I was one of over 8,600 folks who responded to the committee's request for comments. I did mine electronically as did most of those who responded. Having now read the entire report, I decided the best way to summarize what it says here would be to quote the actual Executive Summary in the report itself. So, herewith, some selected paragraphs from that Executive Summary.

"Over the course of its inquiry the Committee studied the existing federal-provincial regulatory framework, heard varied opinions from over 8,600 e-consultation participants, and examined bans in other jurisdictions. The Committee concluded that despite the intensity of arguments in favour of a ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides and a general misunderstanding of the risks associated with chemicals, there is

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be a tropical water plant, and no doubt in Ontario it may be, but here it survives in our pond year after year with no special protection—it has a nice fragrance; *Daphne odora* is a delightful shrub that blooms early—this shot taken on April 23; two more early bloomers here, *Ribes sanguinea* and a good pink *Camellia*—shot taken on April 29; and in our waterside garden (subject to deer visits regularly) two colourful brooms (*Cytisus scoparius* 'Moonlight' and C.s. 'Hollandia'. Below, two new primroses in our collection in the compost area, *Primula acaulis* and P. vialii (Chinese pagoda primrose); a close-up of the Chinese pagoda primrose; though we see *Camassia esculenta* growing in the wild, we seldom see it in gardens but I managed to keep this one doing well; and our lovely unnamed pink azalea at the front door porch at its best when this was originally written on May 20th. Author photos.



insufficient scientific evidence to support a province-wide ban on pesticides for cosmetic use. The majority of the Committee supports using science-based evidence and will not restrict access to products that are approved for safe use in Canada. In its commitment to “protect the public and reduce the use of pesticides according to the IPM principles,” the Committee has focused its recommendations on strengthening regulations on pesticide sales, monitoring and education. The unnecessary use of pesticides can be reduced by providing British Columbians and businesses with the education, tools and support necessary to make informed pest management decisions.

“Of the 7,300 e-questionnaires submitted, almost 5,000 supported a ban on the sale and use of pesticides for cosmetic purposes. Presentations from stakeholders and written submissions received through the e-consultation process provided varied perspectives on four main themes: the safety of pesticides; the use of pesticides in residential and industrial settings; the federal Pest Management Regulatory Agency’s (PMRA) process of testing and registering pesticides for sale in Canada; and existing pesticide legislation in British Columbia.

“Over the course of its ten-month-long inquiry the majority of the Committee was struck by the information it received on the PMRA’s extensive pesticide registration process. The process includes comprehensive and pre-caution-based evaluation of risk in situations where homeowners apply pesticides. Officials from the BC Ministry of Environment provided information on the Integrated Pest Management Act that governs pesticide sale and use in the province.

“The Committee dedicated a significant amount of time to examining research from stakeholders and the public that proposes a link between pesticides and negative health outcomes. It also heard about the possible negative effects pesticides can have on the natural environment. Submitters encouraged the Committee to recommend a province-wide ban based on the view that the precautionary principle is not being applied. Those who argue a ban is unjustified emphasized the thoroughness of the scientific processes the PMRA uses to determine that pesticides are safe for sale and use in Canada. They also stressed the important role pesticides play in improving the value and enjoyment of green spaces, in controlling invasive plants, and in supporting forestry and agriculture.

“As part of its inquiry into the feasibility of a BC ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides, the Committee re-viewed other jurisdictions’ experiences with bans. While these bans generally share a common purpose — the protection of human health and/or the natural environment from perceived unnecessary exposure to pesticides — the approach varies from province to province. In examining what other jurisdictions have done, the Committee noted that to date no other province has used an all-party parliamentary committee to investigate the cosmetic use of pesticides. Also, this Committee’s commitment to understanding pesticide regulation and the work and role of the PMRA appears to be unprecedented.

“Throughout the committee inquiry the all-party Special Committee worked in a collaborative manner and strived to seek common ground. However, committee members have divided on party lines over the justification for a province-wide ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides. The Committee assessed all the evidence carefully, taking more time than originally planned, and the majority of members concluded that currently there is insufficient scientific evidence to warrant a province-wide ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides. Based on currently available studies, the majority cannot justify disagreeing with the findings of the PMRA’s comprehensive pesticide testing and re-evaluations. The minority, however, concluded that there is sufficient scientific evidence available for a province-wide ban on the cosmetic use of pesticides.

“In order to achieve the goals of reducing pesticide use throughout the province, and ensuring safe and proper use of approved products by unlicensed applicators, the Committee makes 17 recommendations that include restricting the sale and use of Commercial-class pesticides, improving enforcement of existing regulations, and

strengthening training and public education related to pesticides use. The Committee recommends regulatory changes to: bolster retail rules, improve sales monitoring, and enhance the training of certified pesticide applicator and dispensers. The Committee also recommends strategies to increase public knowledge of safe pesticide use, to encourage golf courses to fully embrace the pillars of integrated pest management, and to develop a superior pesticide-return program.”

So much for the report itself. I think it is excellent and obviously the most in depth such effort conducted any-where by any province. Bill Bennett and his fellow Liberal MLAs deserve great credit and congratulations!

I am told that those in opposition (groups such as the self-serving David Suzuki Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society and all of the piddling little local groups who lead the opposition to “cosmetic” pesticides) are very upset and determined to fight even harder for a total ban. And, it goes without saying that if the NDP becomes the next government in B.C. come next May, a ban would be guaranteed. At the moment the NDP leads in the polls, but B.C. has a complicated provincial political situation, made even more so recently with the appearance of a new Conservative party. The Liberal party itself is a coalition of free enterprise people (Liberals and Conservatives) put together by Gordon Campbell and others in order to defeat the NDP in the provincial election of May 2001.

Now, for something completely different, here is what I wrote on June 20th, about many common myths that keep coming up, even though most are definitely incorrect.

My friends at the National Garden Bureau just last week published a list of “common myths” that apparently hale from “grandmother’s days.”

They turned to their members and asked for their professional expertise on a few commonly cited garden tips to find out if they were still applicable in today’s gardening world. Turns out most were not. Here are some examples.

Myth: Knock the tops of onions over to make larger bulbs.

Busted!: Actually the opposite is true. If you knock the tops over prematurely, that will stop the bulbing process and thus will make the onion more likely to grow during storage.

Myth: To get sweeter tomatoes, add sugar to the planting hole.

Busted!: Sorry grandma, this is not true. Tomato plants can’t absorb sugar in the soil, they produce it through photosynthesis. The sugar content of a variety is predetermined in the plant’s genetics.

Myth: Pinch the seed pod off if the onion goes to seed.

Busted!: Years ago that was a common practice because older (heirloom) varieties were prone to bolting. In to-day’s world with newer hybrids, if you pinch the seed pod off immediately it will keep the center core of the onion from growing and the end result is a smaller onion that will not store well.

Myth: Perennials won’t bloom the first year, especially bare-root.

Half Busted!: With modern breeding and growing techniques, this is no longer true. Go ahead and plant bare root and potted perennials and enjoy those blooms the first year, assuming you don’t plant them past the time they naturally would bloom. However, if you buy a potted perennial that requires over-wintering, then you will have to wait through the first winter to get the desired blooms. It’s best to enquire from the seller or a knowledgeable neighbour or friend to find out what to expect that first season after planting.

Myth: Plant peas and potatoes on St. Patrick’s Day.

Half Busted!: This can’t possibly be true for all climate zones. It’s much better to refer to the updated USDA (or Canadian) hardiness zone map

and plant according to the local last-frost dates as recommended by local gardening experts. We assume grandma never moved far from where she was born so she must have lived her entire life in the same hardiness zone!

Myth: Planting tomatoes in a trench or up to the first true leaves promotes a sturdier plant.

Half-Busted!: This one is still true for seed propagated heirlooms and hybrids. Planting deeply does help elongate the rooting area since any point on the stem that comes into contact with the soil will root. The exception is when planting grafted tomatoes because if the scion takes root it will negate the benefits of the grafted root-stock, so never plant a grafted tomato too deeply.

I might add here personally, that I have heard from a large number of garden tomato growers who have tried the grafted jobs, and were disappointed. If you have tried them, or are trying them, I should love to hear from you on this new topic.

Myth: Use tuna fish cans around transplant tomato stems to thwart cut worm.

Not Busted!: Yes, Grandma was correct and frugal with this tip! When both ends of the can are removed and the circular can placed around the plant, it acts as a barrier to keep these natural soil surface crawlers from reaching the plant until the stem has thickened past the tender stage. But, may I add, you do not have to use tuna cans. For decades my Dad and I used simple strips of cardboard (not corrugated) pushed into the ground immediately after the tomato plants were planted. This works equally well!

Myth: Add chalk or egg shells to the planting hole for tomato plants.

Not Busted!: Again, a good tip, as both of these items will help prevent blossom end rot in tomatoes since they provide calcium to the fruit (since egg shells take a while to decompose, crush or grind the shells to enable them to dissolve faster).

Myth: Putting egg shell flakes around the base of plants will prevent slug damage.

Not Busted!: Yes, Grandma was right, slugs do not like to crawl over the jagged surface of sharp eggshells so putting a barrier of crushed (not ground too finely) egg shells is a great deterrent.

Myth: Beer traps for slugs.

Not Busted!: Yes, they really do work. And there is even research to show they prefer the light beers over the darker ales and lagers. But, if you get a rain or water the plants, you will need to refill the traps with fresh, undiluted beer as those little critters avoid the watered down stuff.

May I add a comment to this one too? Please do remember that whatever form of beer trap you use for slugs it is important that the edge of the container be even with the soil surface. The slugs are not great mountain climb-ers and your catch will be slim if you just set the container on top of the soil without digging it in.

Finally, I should like to add one myth of my own that I have encountered on a regular basis for the last three or four decades.

Myth: Once tomato plants start to grow cut off the excess foliage from the outside of the plants to allow more sunlight to get through to ripen the fruit.

Busted!: This idea hails from England where they get far less sunshine than we do here in North America. It is absolutely not necessary to

remove foliage from tomato plants—in fact it is not a good idea at all because the foliage draws up nutrients and helps develop the fruits. The only possible exception to this is that some growers of tomatoes like to remove the ‘suckers’ that develop between any two major branches of the plants. These, generally, will never produce fruit, but then, like other foliage just mentioned, a well-foliaged plant will produce a good crop of fruit.

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