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# SafeLawns.Blog

DAILY Q&A

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25. June 2010

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### Heroes? Here's One of Mine



Dr. June Irwin was a guest of honor along with director Brett Plymale and yours truly at the Hudson screening of A Chemical Reaction last week. (Hudson Gazette photo)

At the ripe old age of near 50, I now realize I've had few enduring heroes in my lifetime. I've probably had thousands of infatuations along the way, including about three girls a day in college

and since then a peculiar fascination for singers, actors and sports figures. I'm quite sure that makes me American rather than Canadian at my core, since our neighbors to the north typically eschew idolatry.

My grandparents certainly qualify. Born of the waste-not, want-not generation that survived the Depression, Gram and Gramp went on to become Maine's dairy farmers of the year in 1970 . . . and then wrote to the folks who presented them with the award and said they couldn't imagine they deserved it. When my grandfather finally did travel to Springfield, Mass., in 1971 to accept his plaque, it was the first time he had ever left Maine since his family emigrated from New Brunswick, Canada, when he was 2.

I admire my father, who is self-made from a childhood destitute poverty, and my mother for her infinite compassion with children, including her oldest son. I'm in awe of my daughter, who just finished medical school and will soon start rotations, and my son, who despite overwhelming Attention Deficit Disorder, is one of the kindest people I know at his core. I think my wife is a saint for putting up with me.

As far as heroes go, though, one person probably tops my list these days. I'm under strict orders not to talk about her age, but I can tell you that Dr. June Irwin has been swinging for the fences for a very long, long time. From becoming one of the first female medical students at McGill University, to starting her own 70-acre farm 35 years ago, to showing up at a town meeting in Hudson 25 years ago to talk about the toxicity of lawn chemicals, the remarkable dermatologist has never once strayed from her ideals or convictions as near as I can tell. She deflected ridicule, shouldered threats from the chemical industry and never once lowered her resolve as the legal battle she instigated weaved its way through the Canadian courts. On the summer day of 2001, when her work at the town of Hudson, Quebec, made world history, Dr. June was treating a rash in her one-of-a-kind eclectic office in Pointe Claire, Quebec. "The victory wasn't about me," she said matter of factly in our film, *A Chemical Reaction*. "it was a community effort."

I write this today because I can't get a phone call from June out my head from last week. The film's director and I were driving back to Maine from Hudson after the DVD release screening and my cell phone rang. The ageless, timeless woman on the other end of the phone had her medical books open as wide as her eyes and was offering medical advice for my son . . . for free, at 12:30 a.m. And she was offering to do more research as we said our goodnights at about 1 a.m. When was the last time your doctor, or anyone in your life, did anything like that for you?

Researching the Hudson story for another writing project I have underway, I came across this web site that evaluates doctors: <http://www.ratemds.com/doctor-ratings/81893/Dr-Dorothy-June-Irwin-Montreal-QC.html>. To me, it reads like a collection of comments from the haves and have-nots of this world, and I'm not talking about worldly riches. Just read a few paragraphs from her patients and you'll know what I mean.

I also write this today in honor of my mother, whose retirement party tomorrow after 35 years of providing daycare to Maine children, will bring many generations of families together — and in memory of a friend's father, [Shep Lee](#), whom I met just once. That was all the time I needed to understand why this man of his word was one of the most revered people in our state. He, like June Irwin, always lived by his ideals — even if it meant he might lose a sale at one of his car dealerships, or if expression of his Democratic opinion might risk alienating a Republican colleague.

Life's too damn short to live any other way, isn't it?

So keep swinging, June. I know you will anyway. Good luck tomorrow, Mom. Let the love sink in. And sail on, Shep. I'm certain you leave here knowing your legacy is in good hands.

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25. June 2010

[0 Comments](#)

## **Florida Couple Leads by the Example of No Lawn**

In Florida, where fresh water shortages are chronic, one couple sets an example for others to follow. Now I'm not anti-lawn, mind you. With children around, I consider lawns a necessity for playing ball, croquet or any number of games. But the principles in this article are sound:

<http://www.beacononlinenews.com/news/daily/2751>

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24. June 2010

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## **Pesticide Free Slogan Contest: Top Five Entrants Revealed**

With folks chiming in from across the globe, the slogan contest for the pesticide free lawn sign and T-shirt received about 40 times as many votes as it did slogans. At least 30 slogans received a single vote, but these five (in no particular order as Ryan Seacrest would say) were clearly the top 5. We're going to keep voting open until midnight Monday and then begin production on the finished product. To vote in public for one of these top 5, post your reply on the blog, below, or email [Paul@SafeLawns.org](mailto:Paul@SafeLawns.org) to keep your opinion private.

Remember, five voters will be selected at random to receive a free weather-proof lawn sign when it is completed at the printer.

**Green Lawn, Green Earth, No Pesticides**

**For You, For Me, We're Pesticide Free**

**Kiss My Grass, It's Organic**

**Safe to Play, No Pesticides, No Way**

**You Shouldn't Have to Kill for a Beautiful Lawn**

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23. June 2010

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## **Groundcover Wednesdays: Bearberry**



Salt tolerance makes this a good plant for medians.



The edible red berries are a visual treat.

Week 3: Bearberry

An exhibit at my presentation for the 40th anniversary of the Lake Environmental Association last Saturday reminded me just how much the native landscape has to offer — answering the call from many SafeLawns followers to make sure we focus as much as possible on plants that were growing here before the first settlers began redrawing the landscape with plants from away.

Well, one absolutely awesome plant at the top of any list of natives is bearberry, one of the most beautiful and durable groundcovers. Low-growing and, initially, somewhat slow-growing, it will eventually form a wide mat that is ideal for holding a bank, delineating a planting bed, or encircling a rock outcropping.

Here's a rundown:

Botanical name: *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*

Common cultivars available at garden centers: 'Massachusetts' is a disease-resistant selection with smaller leaves than the species found in the wild. 'Point Reyes' is reportedly more heat and drought tolerant than other forms. 'Vancouver Jade,' introduced in Canada at the University of British Columbia Botanical Garden introduction, it has larger, glossier leaves than typical. It's also faster growing than the original native.

Plant Characteristics: Low maintenance, disease, insect and drought tolerant. Tolerates wind and slopes, but doesn't like really hot summers farther south than Zones 6 or 7. Deer and rabbit resistant. A unique feature is its relatively high salt tolerance, which is why you'll see this on many median strips in northern cities.

Foliage Characteristics: The shiny leaves are evergreen, with dark green color, which turns reddish to bronze in the fall and winter. The leaves are edible and have been used for centuries by herbalists in various tinctures and other remedies.

Flower Characteristics: White to pink in color, they're urn-shaped when they bloom in April or May.

Fruit: The edible red berries are definitely a visual highlight on the plant and some of the cultivars possess a vast abundance of berries that give bearberry four seasons of interest.

USDA Hardiness Zone: 3 to 7

Light Range: Part Shade to Full Sun

pH Range: 4.5 to 7

Origin: Temperate regions of North America and Europe

Soil Range: Mostly Sand to Clay Loam, but prefers thinner soils.

Foot Traffic: It will tolerate the occasional errant soccer ball and subsequent sneaker tracks, but shouldn't be planted in the walkway.

General Comments: Like most of the plants we'll pick each week, this plant is self-sufficient. Don't bother fertilizing after you create a fertile planting hole with compost. Be patient when you first

plant bearberry; it's a good idea to surround it with a few perennials that can be transplanted later when the bearberry growth kicks into full gear, typically by the third year.

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23. June 2010

[6 Comments](#)

## New Hampshire May Be Poised to Make a Major Anti-Pesticide Splash, or Maybe Not



Business has been good during June at the Manchester, N.H., airport, at least on the flights leading to and from Washington, D.C. With that state's legislature considering bills this month affecting both bio-engineered crops AND lawn and garden pesticides, many of the chemical industry's finest suits have been frequenting the hallways of the statehouse in Concord on Tuesdays with a singular message: "Business as usual is working, so don't let these fringe environmentalists sway your vote." I attended a committee hearing Tuesday afternoon, June 22, at the request of Rep. Suzanne Smith, the sponsor of bill [HB 1456](#), as well as the [LEAH Collective](#), an upstart environmental group that has done a remarkably good job of making a lot of productive noise in New Hampshire since its inception in February.

HB 1456 enacted law that formed a committee to study "the use of pesticides, herbicides, and their alternatives in residential neighborhoods, school properties, playgrounds, and other places children congregate." And though it's just a study bill, the nation's leading pesticide salesmen want to make sure the committee gets all the "right" facts during its hearings each Tuesday afternoon in June. The lineup of pesticide "experts" was prodigious. The way they deliver their well-rehearsed lines would seemingly make their act run as smoothly as a long-running Broadway show. Here are just a few of the zingers:

**From Bayer Crop Science: "We know more about pesticides than any other classification of industrial chemicals. If something is found not to be safe, it is taken off the market. At this point, all the dangerous pesticides have been removed."**

Even if you take this statement to be accurate, the inherent flaw in the system is obvious. Only when something is found to be dangerous is it then taken off the market. Bayer and the others stressed over and over that the Environmental Protection Agency provides a "rigorous" 10-year risk assessment analysis of each chemical approved for use and yet Jeremiah Duncan, a chemist from Plymouth State University, testified that while he worked at the EPA, the budget cuts were so severe under the Bush administration that the EPA closed its library and carted away the documents necessary to make a risk assessment in the first place.

**And another from Bayer: "When pesticides break down in the environment, we carefully study the metabolites (byproducts) just as rigidly as we study the primary compounds and if these metabolites are proven to be toxic, we don't use them."**

Recently, the General Accounting Office of Congress noted that the EPA was at least a full decade behind in its mandated assessments of pesticide compounds. The EPA does not, in any substantive measure, evaluate metabolites of toxic compounds. When these breakdown products are studied by independent laboratories, they are often found to be far more toxic than the primary pesticide.

**From Scott Miracle Gro's Director of Environmental Stewardship, Chris Wible: "It's our goal to create a safe, healthy environment for children."**

As soon as Mr. Wible offered that party line, I asked the committee chair for permission to address him directly. "How does killing a dandelion, a clover plant or a piece of plantain create a safe environment for children?" I asked.

Without skipping a beat, he calmly explained that dandelions, clover and other weeds attracted bees, and therefore you don't want those plants around. "My daughter, who is allergic to bees, ought to have the same right to play on the school fields without fear of being stung," he said. "And the school nurse does not allow her to bring the EpiPen onto the field; she keeps it all the way in her office."

I honestly thought the pathologist sitting next to me was going to fall out of his chair on that one. [Dr. Jerome Silbert](#) was in town from Connecticut, where he was instrumental in helping to pass the historic Connecticut law banning pesticides around schools in 2005.

"They should fire the nurse," he said aloud.

Lasting little more than two hours, the unusually informal hearing was at once curious, humorous, inspiring, frustrating and at times outright maddening. Remarkably civil for the most part, the seating pattern literally pitted environmental activists shoulder-to-shoulder and chair to chair with chemical lobbyists whom they not-so-secretly loathe, and visa versa. I, for one, was delighted to be seated way down one side of the table from Jim Campanella, the outspoken owner of the LawnDawg company of Nashua, N.H., who smugly announced during the pre-hearing introductions that he was there "on behalf of his 15,000 customers who wanted a nice lawn." I've never had a real conversation with the man, but I've been told many stories about how he vehemently scoffs at the growing body of pesticide toxicity evidence and thinks only of improving his company's bottom line. When I heard him openly declare in February that "we are the true environmentalists," I witnessed his delusion first hand.

It's tough to sit there and listen to people tell outright lies at worst or, at best, bend the hell out of the truth. The primary intent of Rep. Smith's bill is to look at removing weed killers from lawns, much like lawmakers have done in Canada. She would like to, at a minimum, consider a school pesticide bill like the ones enacted in [Connecticut](#) and [New York](#). On Tuesday, the pesticide lobbyists constantly tried to instill fear in the minds of the New Hampshire committee, however, by talking about everything from termites and ticks, to Eastern equine encephalitis and just about every other insect-borne disease. No one on our side is talking about removing pesticides absolutely necessary when a public health issue is involved, but the chemical industry will literally say anything to confuse, distort and muddy the issue.

I left there feeling incredibly sorry for the committee members, all of whom who are basically unpaid volunteers struggling to sort through fact and the high, smelly piles of fiction. I left there feeling disgusted that the votes for and against doing something seem to be literally following party lines; the Democrats come talk to me, Dr. Silbert and the folks from LEAH afterward and the Republicans canoodle in the aisles with Scotts Miracle Gro, Bayer Crop Science and the master spin doctors themselves, the paid shills of The Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment.

It's tough to read how this will go. It may well be that, if no compromise can be reached, the lobbyists will lift a toast on that last flight back to Washington — content in business as usual in New Hampshire for a while longer. The Democrat lawmakers in the room really want this process to lead to *something* and they implored us to find common ground where synthetic and chemical and organic approaches can peacefully co-exist.

But if you've ever looked at soil life under a microscope you know that the two are like the oil and water flowing through the Gulf right now. Soil microbes can't survive in an environment polluted by chemical fertilizers and pesticides, anymore than the fish and crustaceans can make it off the northern Florida coast . . . so what are we supposed to do? A compromise is tough.

And besides, it's not easy to work with a man who would have us be rid of all bees anywhere children might congregate. But if you'd like to pass your condolences for his daughter's condition along to Chris Wible at Scotts, his email is [Chris.Wible@Scotts.com](mailto:Chris.Wible@Scotts.com).

Or, better still, come to New Hampshire and meet him in person next Tuesday afternoon. If you have an extra EpiPen to share, I'm sure he'd appreciate the gesture.

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22. June 2010

[0 Comments](#)

## **Lawn Reform Coalition Issues First Newsletter**

[LawnReform.org](http://www.lawnreform.org) has been around now for about nine months, an appropriate enough time to give birth to its first newsletter: <http://www.sustainable-gardening.com/archives/5888>. The group, which includes some of the leading garden writers, broadcasters and photographers in the United States, has had plenty of success stories to shout about. Thanks to blogger extraordinaire [Susan Harris](#) for herding all of the "cats" into a functional group.

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21. June 2010

[0 Comments](#)

## **NBC Video Tip of the Week: Interesting New Hardy Shrubs**

For our video tip for NBC news this week, we focused on some new shrubs that are cold hardy for the northern climates (Zones 3-4): <http://www.wcsh6.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=119163>

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21. June 2010

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## **Slogan Contest: And the Winner Should Be?**

# My Lawn is **NOT** In-Toxinated



Some entrants even sent their own artwork.

The deadline has come and gone for our Pesticide Free Lawn slogan contest. Thanks to so many of you who entered the contest. We've pasted most of the entries below (the ones that are fit for a family lawn anyway) and it's now up to your votes to determine the winner.

Please post your vote below or send your vote to [paul@safelawns.org](mailto:paul@safelawns.org). One vote per person, please. And we'll choose five voters at random to win a free lawn sign as soon as we get them printed! (No new entries, please!)

Pesticide Free Benefits You and Me

For you, for me, we're pesticide-free

Pesticide-free! Health or pesticide. You decide.

Safe to Play! No Pesticides. No Way.

Pesticides Set Aside

Green and Clean

Nurturing Nature Naturally

No Fear Chemical Clear  
Safe to Play, No Poison Spray  
Safe to Play on, No Poison Sprayed on  
Happy to say, 'No Poison Spray'  
Protecting You and Your Environment  
No DANGER Here: Keep ON the GRASS!  
Safe Kids, Safe Animals, Safe Earth – SafeLawns.org  
Green Lawn, Green Earth – No Pesticides  
Pesticides are Poison – Don't poison your lawn  
Bee kind – Don't poison your lawn  
This Lawn is PERFECTLY SAFE  
Because keeping families safe is more important than weeds.  
Kiss My Grass  
This Is Your Lawn Off Drugs...Any Questions?  
A Chemical Free Lawn...Just As Nature Intended.  
I ♥ Safe Lawns  
Safe Lawns – Why risk getting birth defects, ADHD, leukemia, breast cancer, auto immune disease, endocrine dysfunction, asthma, or Parkinson's disease over your lawn?  
Safe Lawns are toxic free  
Safe for you and me.  
Bare feet safe here!  
Safe lawn – no chemicals – no worries  
Lawn safe for your child and mine  
Come home to a SafeLawn.org  
My Lawn is Better than your Lawn!  
This lawn is a Safe Lawn. Yes it has a weed or two, but it doesn't cause cancer like the others do!  
Chemical free is the only way to be.  
Know what's in your lawn?  
Chemical free zone  
Safe for the whole family  
KEEP ON LAWN!  
LAWN ON!  
A safer lawn for you and me.  
Safelawn — A shoe-free zone!  
For a Greener Tomorrow. Safelawn Today.  
For Our Planet's Future  
Safe Lawns, Safe Families  
Natural Lawn Care Practiced Here.  
Lawns can look great without chemicals  
Safe for children, pets, and the planet. Naturally  
Better for your lawn, better for you.  
For you, for me, we're pesticide-free  
Health or pesticide. You decide  
Chemical Free...the way Mother Nature Intended  
Truly \*ORGANICALLY\* Green  
Because we love our families more, natural lawn is the way to go  
Safe all year, no pesticides here  
Pesticides don't care what they kill  
I Practice Pesticide Abstinence  
You shouldn't have to kill for a beautiful lawn  
WARNING: The Surgeon General Will Eventually Determine that Pesticide Usage is Dangerous to EVERYONE'S Health.  
WARNING: Quitting Pesticide Usage Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to EVERYONE'S Health

WARNING: Pregnant Women Exposed to Pesticides May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth, And Low Birth Weight.

Win the DARWIN Award – Keep Using Pesticides

Jesus Didn't Use Pesticides, neither did Moses, Mohammad or Confucius

Don't Panic! It's Organic

De-cide against pesticides!

DE-cide, DON'T Pesticide!

Pesticides Can't Kiss My Grass

BEE pesticide free!

Ecosystem in Progress

Tread on Me, I am Organic

Imagine! No Pesticides!

My Lawn is Not In-Toxinated

Beautiful Lawns, Naturally!

Pesticide free, Naturally!

LAWNS FOR LIFE! All welcome safe – toxin free

Pesticides: who needs 'em?

We take the "pest" out of "pesticide" using organic ingredients

Healed Property – Pesticide Free Zone

Clean Air, Clean Water, No Pesticides

One Yard At A Time for Pesticide Free Zones

Birds Welcome – Pesticides Unwelcome

Birds, Bees, and Babies love pesticide-free lawns

Mother Nature knows Best! My lawn is organic

My Lawn is Pesticide-free and Fabulous.

Growing with Nature

Turf's Up Pollution's Down Go Organic!

Turf is Green Air and Water Clean

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21. June 2010

[2 Comments](#)

## **Does Compost “Repel” Pests? In California, You Better Not Say So**

Gardeners have been applying compost and compost tea to their gardeners since gardening began. The dry compost and the liquid tea give the plants more vigor, a bigger root mass and generally better health than plants grown without those substances.

When forced to apply compost tea to my grandmother's garden in Maine as a child, I would often protest, saying, “Why do I always have to do this, Grammy?” To which she would always reply, “Because it keeps the bad bugs away and invites the good bugs in.”

Any longtime gardener knows that compost makes plants more insect and disease resistant and, yet, you better not make that claim in California — at least not if you're selling the stuff. George Hahn learned that the hard way, to the tune of a \$100,000 fine and a lengthy, expensive court battle. Here's the story:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/jun/20/fertilizer-flap-goes-to-court/>

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20. June 2010

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## **Compost Tea: Why & How**

 Slide1

I knew I was in a good place in Bridgton, Maine, Saturday morning when I walked into my Landscaping to Save the Lakes presentation at the Lakes Environmental Association's 40th anniversary meeting and immediately spotted a dry wall bucket and rain barrel. Inside the bucket

were a small air pump and nylon sock full of compost; the only missing ingredient for the makings of compost tea was the water.

With those sorts of props in place, it's easy to lead the audience into a discussion of one of my favorite subjects: The Poop Loop. Just stating that phrase aloud elicits giggles . . . and the occasional scrunched up nose. The Poop Loop is not my term, but is rather a phrase coined by Dr. Elaine Ingham, the godmother of the organic gardening and food revolution in this country. In basic terms, the Loop explains that we get our energy from the sun and then recycle everything back into the soil as fertilizer — or at least we should be doing that. The Poop Loop is an explanation of sustainable agriculture and gardening in its most simple terms — that we all become worm food at some point in time if we don't put a metal box around ourselves at the end of our time. It's just the natural order of things.

The Poop Loop can also be called soil cycling, or mineralization, or the soil food web, which is another of Elaine's coined phrases. And whatever you call it, the Loop is absolutely dependent on life in the soil, much of it microscopic that we can't see with the naked eye.

And that's where compost tea comes into play. By "brewing" biologically active liquid that we then spray onto our lawns and gardens, we're inoculating the plants and soil with the life necessary for the Poop Loop to thrive.

Make sense? Well, for further clarity, here's a link to one of Elaine's articles on compost tea brewing from Fine Gardening magazine: <http://www.finegardening.com/how-to/articles/brewing-compost-tea.aspx>

. For quite possibly the best layman's explanation of the life underground, check out Jeff Lowenfels's book: <http://www.amazon.com/Teaming-Microbes-Gardeners-Guide-Soil/dp/0881927775>. Come to think of it, the book would make a great Father's Day gift . . . Have a great one.

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[Slogan Contest: And the Winner Should Be?](#)

[Former Chemical Applicator: 'I Am Literally Ashamed of Myself for Being Part of It'](#)

[Scare Tactic: Green Industry Attempts Witch Hunt Lawsuit](#)

[Imidacloprid: What You Must Know Now](#)

[About This Blog](#)

[Government Agency: We Must Reduce Toxics](#)

[Sometimes, You Just Have to Mow . . .](#)

[Is Roundup Safe?](#)

[Groundcover Wednesday: Lemon Thyme](#)

## Upcoming Events

No events to show.

## Recent Posts

[Heroes? Here's One of Mine](#)

[Florida Couple Leads by the Example of No Lawn](#)

[Pesticide Free Slogan Contest: Top Five Entrants Revealed](#)

[Groundcover Wednesdays: Bearberry](#)

[New Hampshire May Be Poised to Make a Major Anti-Pesticide Splash, or Maybe Not](#)

## Pages

[About This Blog](#)

[Full Calendar of Events](#)



## Blog Archives

[June 2010](#) (34)

[May 2010](#) (34)

[April 2010](#) (39)

[March 2010](#) (40)

[February 2010](#) (39)

[January 2010](#) (31)

[December 2009](#) (29)

[November 2009](#) (30)

[October 2009](#) (24)

[September 2009](#) (30)

[August 2009](#) (27)

[July 2009](#) (45)

[June 2009](#) (12)