

Concerns over chemical pesticides clash with keeping the grasses green

KATE HAMMER / Globe and Mail

TORONTO (August 4, 2008) — The beet juice didn't work and the lady bugs helped a little, but not enough to justify their cost. For now, chemical pesticides are the only thing that can keep Toronto's cemeteries green, according to Rick Cowen, a spokesman for the Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries, whose workers went on strike last month.

"The families of the individuals that are buried in those cemeteries don't take lightly to seeing the condition of their grave site, or their family plot overridden by weeds and pests," he said.

About 180 seasonal landscaping workers and 50 cemetery interment employees returned to work last week after negotiating a contract that in addition to providing increased wages, promised decreased exposure to chemical pesticides for cemetery employees.

Chemical pesticides were banned for use in Toronto's residential areas after a bylaw went into full effect last September, but leeway was offered to golf courses and cemeteries, where chemical pesticides may still be used in the event of an infestation.

Union members have complained that the sharp chemical smell that lingers in the air after the grounds are sprayed makes them nervous, according to Willie Wham, president of the Canadian Service Workers Union. The Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries already had a policy of using integrative measures of pest control, but were instead using chemicals as a first line of defence, he explained.

"Spraying pesticides is a last resort, and management were treating it as the only thing that they would do," he said.

Toronto Public Health's website includes a "backgrounder" that lists some of the health risks that have been associated with pesticide exposure, including decreased fertility and an increased risk of developing Parkinson's disease and certain types of cancer.

But some experts, including University of Guelph toxicologist Keith Solomon, say that although gardeners should be sure to "use every tool in the toolbox" to combat infestations, chemical pesticides are safe, and conclusive health risks have not yet been scientifically substantiated.

"The risks associated with these products are so low that basically they're insignificant," he said. "In some cases it might be necessary to use pesticides, after you've tried all the alternatives."

Grasses are especially susceptible to fungal attack when they're kept short, and according to Mr. Wham, the grasses at Mount Pleasant Group's cemeteries will henceforth be cut to 3 inches, rather than two, in hopes of reducing the need for chemical pesticides.

In the newly negotiated contract, he said, "the actual language is that they will follow the integrative pest management system and basically do everything they can to avoid spraying pesticides."