No pesticide, no problem

Mechanical weeding, regular mowing key to attractive lawn after Saanich ban

BY JIM GIBSON, TIMES COLONIST APRIL 22, 2010 1:20 AM

Weeds such as dandelions can be tackled with natural pesticides containing acetic acid, corn gluten meal and other non-synthetic chemicals.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

There's no need for front lawns to be overrun by weeds in the wake of Saanich's pesticide ban, according to the municipality's parks manager, Rae Roer.

"Mechanical weeding works very well," Roer says, referring to pulling weeds by hand. Saanich organic gardener and author Carolyn Herriott goes Roer one better, saying "manual weeding works wonders" particularly paired with lawn-mowing.

Saanich's ban on cosmetic pesticide use takes effect May 1 and follows those already in place in Victoria and Esquimalt. Fines can range from $250 to $10,000. The municipality is even holding a pesticide bylaw celebration at noon today at Saanich Hall, in honour of Earth Day.

"Pesticide is a general term for any substance designed to prevent, destroy, repel or mitigate injurious, noxious or troublesome living organisms," says the Saanich website. Pesticides include chemicals that kill plants, insects and fungus.

"There's no need to be upset [by the ban]," Herriott says.

By employing organic products or manual weeding, people will both save money and the wildlife in their gardens, she says.

Good lawns come from "good practices" such as regular mowing, aeration, thatching and mechanical weed removal, Roer says. These practices have been in use at 21 sites -- recreation centres, municipal

hall and floral boulevards -- around the municipality since Saanich adopted the pesticide-free pledge in 2008. Since 1995, the municipality has reduced its use of artificial pesticides by 95 per cent.

To the casual eye, the impact on lawns at those sites is minimal, according to Roer.

"People will see a few more weeds on boulevards than they used to," he says. Also, he adds, more dandelions on passive turf areas.

Some Saanich homeowners are buying up pesticides before the ban.

"Some people are coming in and saying, 'we'd better get this before the ban,' " Elk Lake Garden Centre's Debbie Sherwood says.

The centre continues to sell some cosmetic pesticide products because its customer base is wider than just Saanich. The demand for such products has dropped over the years with the rise in organic gardening, according to Sherwood.

There are alternatives to these cosmetic pesticides that work for all but the most aggressive weeds such as horsetail and buttercup. Sales reps tell Sherwood that an alternative product could be available next year to tackle these aggressive weeds.

If a lawn becomes too infested for manual weeding, get a lawn stripper, Herriott says. The stripper removes all the lawn so you can start again.

Cultivated lawns are what Herriott calls a mono-culture -- just one variety of plant. This does not occur in nature. It works better if different plants co-exist.

"I don't mind the odd diversity on my lawn," she says. "Perhaps we could think in different shades of green."

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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PESTICIDE BAN

Permitted pesticides include:

- acetic acid (vinegar in products like EcoClear as herbicides);

- corn gluten meal (a natural herbicide used in turf weeds);

- methoprene (an insect growth regulator);

- botanically derived pesticides such as pyrethrins and rotenone;

- insect bait stations and pheromones;

- insecticidal or herbicidal soaps;

- mineral oils;

- sulphurs, ferrous sulphate (moss killer).

Not permitted:

Traditional products containing synthetic chemicals including glyphosate (as found in products such as Roundup, Sidekick and many others), 2,4-D (such as Weed n' Feed, Killex, etc.), malathion, carbaryl (such as Sevin), and diazinon are some of the more common pesticides that are not permitted for general use.

Note: the above is only a sample of popular brands. Residents should check products for ingredients or chemical content.

The bylaw does not apply to the use of pesticides needed to manage pests that:

- transmit human diseases;

- affect agriculture or forestry;

- are on or inside buildings;

- are on a parcel of land that is used solely for commercial (such as golf courses), institutional or industrial purposes;

- are on residential areas of farms.