

## Pesticide-Free Parks Take Labor ... Lots Of It

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*Cities and schools like the idea, but the extra work is a sticking point*

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Tatum Smith (left), 4; her twin sister, Jordan; and their friend Eleanor Robb (right), 5, watch as Katherine McDuffy, 5, does a somersault on a March afternoon at Lowell Park in Everett. Eleanor's mother, Megan Dunn, wants the city to stop spraying pesticides.



- The kids gather rocks in the grass at the playground.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Five-year-old Eleanor Robb runs through a field at Lowell Park after picking a handful of dandelions on a March afternoon.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Tatum Smith (left) climbs on the swing set at Lowell Park while playing with her sister, Jordan, and friends Katherine McDuffy and Eleanor Robb (right) in March.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Katherine McDuffy (left), Eleanor Robb and Tatum Smith push the merry-go-round at the Lowell Park playground in March.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Megan Dunn (left) talks with Katherine McDuffy (right), twins Tatum and Jordan Smith, and Dunn's daughter, Eleanor Robb (in blue) after the kids spent a March afternoon playing at Lowell Park. To Dunn, pesticide use in parks is an issue both for public health and for Puget Sound.

By **Noah Haglund**, Herald Writer

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Health page

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EVERETT -- Megan Dunn watched her children pick bouquets of dandelions in Lowell Park, where she's spent five years trying to stop city crews from spraying herbicides and other pest-control chemicals.

A pilot project to keep the park pesticide-free through hand-weeding went to seed last year. It died out after Dunn and her neighbors could no longer muster the volunteer momentum to keep it going.

"Last year, the city of Everett sprayed pesticides around every tree base so they wouldn't have to trim there," said Dunn, 37, who is drawing on the experience for a master's program at UW Bothell. "What's wrong with having longer grass around the base? Or throwing mulch down?"

Like Everett, other cities and school districts like the idea of going pesticide-free. However, trial and error shows it can be tricky to pull off without lots of extra labor.

Programs at Martha Lake Elementary in Lynnwood and Columbia Elementary in Mukilteo endured for years, but are now defunct.

Snohomish kept its city parks pesticide-free for several years until 2009, when staff cutbacks forced the city to go back to using some pre-emergent herbicides. The city still has a well-regarded program to minimize unnecessary use of pest-control chemicals.

Dunn hasn't given up. She continues to push Everett to adopt better pesticide policies. And many in city government are listening.

Dunn first took up the cause in 2008, when she saw city workers applying chemicals in Lowell Park while her children played nearby.

Running and rolling in the grass at the 10-acre community park has been part of the routine for her children, Eleanor Robb, 5, and Carter Robb, 7. So it's natural their mom would want to keep them away from the man-made chemicals city landscaping crews use to kill weeds and unwanted critters.

Dunn hoped to show that a little harmless elbow grease could replace herbicides, fungicides and insecticides that might pose a risk to people or the environment.

Everett parks officials agreed to go along. If things went well, they would consider extending the pilot program to other city parks. A one-year trial was followed by a two-year pilot program.

Though weeding parties netted up to 150 hours per season of volunteer labor, they couldn't keep it up. The city resumed spraying the park last year.

"It's going to be very difficult for the parks with their declining budget to take on something that takes on more labor costs," said Everett City Councilwoman Brenda

Stonecipher, who also serves on Everett's **Park Board**. "Given unlimited resources, I'd say, 'Sure, let's go pesticide-free.' "

Stonecipher and others welcome the conversation, though.

Dunn returned to the city Park Board in October to suggest that Everett adopt an integrated pest management policy, a streamlined approach to fighting vegetation, moss, mold, insects or other living things that crop up where people don't want them.

For her, the impetus has been evidence that long-term exposure to some pesticides may contribute to cancers, low fertility or other health problems. Another area of concern: herbicides in storm runoff.

"For me, it's a public health issue and also we should be good stewards of Puget Sound," she said.

Integrated pest management programs have taken on those challenges, and others, by offering more efficient ways to ward off weeds and insects, while promoting plant health. They're becoming increasingly common at public parks, schools and corporate campuses.

The term pesticides includes herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and rodenticides.

Some landscaping alternatives to herbicides include the gardening mantra "right plant, right place." There's also hand-weeding and mulching to fend off weeds, proper pruning techniques to prevent disease, and better drainage.

Good pest-management policies favor the least hazardous chemicals, making sure they're the most effective product for the task at hand and that they're used correctly.

Schools already are required by state law to post a prominent public notice at least 48 hours before spraying pest-control chemicals, in most situations. Warning-notice practices for other areas, including public parks and golf courses, are less stringent and do not require the same advance posting.

While Everett posts warning signs and flags, leaders acknowledge they could be doing a better job.

"We have internal procedures and we follow those to the letter," said John Petersen, the assistant director for park planning and maintenance. "We don't have published policy."

Specific changes under discussion include better park signs to explain pesticide procedures, Petersen said.

The Park Board expects to take up the topic at its next meeting on May 14 and to continue discussions over the summer.



Considerations for new pesticide rules include whether the public minds seeing weeds crop up at parks and playfields, Petersen said. Also, it costs money to replace turf after weeds take root in the grass.

"We're always looking to reduce our use," he said. "We have probably cut back by 80 percent or so in the past 10 years."

That said, Everett lags behind some other cities in adopting a formal strategy to combat weeds, moss, troublesome insects and pesky rodents.

"What I'd like to see is more of a citywide policy that guarantees pesticides are a last-resort option," Dunn said. "Part of it is just accepting the dandelion."

Everett's employees who apply pesticides are licensed by the state and keep logs. They put flags down to mark sprayed areas and provide 24 hours advance notice.

Everett reports using seven types of herbicides.

The most common herbicide Everett uses is a glyphosate-based material similar to what's sold under the name Roundup. The city also uses Crossbow, Surflan, Trimec, Dimension, Rodeo and Snapshot.

"Based on just the chemical usage, I don't see anything alarming," said Carrie Foss, who heads Washington State University Extension's program for **urban integrated pest management**.

While Foss encourages landscapers to minimize use of herbicides that kill plants before they emerge from the soil, she cautions against judging a city or school district's practices solely based on the fact that they use them.

"Pesticides are one of the tools in the toolbox," she said.

Chemicals should only be used as part of a well-thought-out pest management program, she cautioned.

While WSU Extension avoids blacklisting many commonly used herbicides, the Seattle-based nonprofit **Washington Toxics Coalition**, along with the city of Seattle, created a three-tiered table identifying chemicals to phase out. Seattle lists three herbicides used by Everett in the tier 1 group, which it considers of most concern: Crossbow, Trimec and Snapshot.

The most commonly used herbicides, the glyphosate-based material like Roundup, are considered tier 2 chemicals, which the coalition wants to see used less.

"It's really important to have a guide about what pesticides should not be used," said

Erika Shreder, the coalition's science director.

The Edmonds School District, for one, uses at least seven different types of chemicals. They include what Shreder considered large amounts of tier 1 herbicides, as well as insecticides for getting rid of wasps and hornets.

"Edmonds School District's pesticide use is concerning both for the quantities they use and for the pesticides they've chosen, many of which are among the most harmful," Shreder said. "It's disappointing to see that **school districts** continue to use hazardous chemicals in and around schools when there are safer and effective tools available."

The Everett, Marysville and Mukilteo school districts all reported using at least one tier 1 pesticide.

While wasps or hornets can be a serious danger to children, Shreder said trained pest-control professionals have numerous other tools they can use.

"Generally, a wasp or hornet nest does not appear overnight," she said.

In Everett, Dunn said the city has been cooperative in working through her concerns.

"They've been very receptive," she said.

Other programs have succeeded in eliminating or drastically reducing pesticides, Foss said.

Examples include the **Port of Seattle**, which since 1998 has maintained 60 acres of parkland using all-organic landscaping.

The **city of Seattle** uses volunteers to help maintain 22 parks without pesticides, as part of a program that began in 2001. Seattle also keeps 250 areas pesticide-free, including picnic grounds and community gardens. "Pesticide-free can work for landscaped areas," Foss said. "If you're going to use volunteers, they need to be managed. It needs to be an institutionalized program."