

TALKING TO YOUR NEIGHBORS ABOUT PESTICIDES

A FACTSHEET FROM MIDWEST PESTICIDE ACTION CENTER



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Your neighbors use pesticides and you prefer not to. You may have wanted to talk to them about it but found it difficult or intimidating to do so. How do you bring the subject up, what would you tell them, and how should you handle it if they get angry or offended? You may feel that you don't know enough facts to answer their questions. You may feel that it's not worth risking your friendship, or at least your pleasant day-to-day interactions. After all, home yard care is like politics: personal and often controversial.

Why do you want to talk to them?

The dynamics of any conversation between neighbors about pesticides will depend on why the conversation is taking place, as well as personal knowledge and beliefs. The strong sense of property rights and personal privacy in this country can cause people to be defensive about how they manage their property. But remember that the nonpesticide user has rights, too! If chemicals drift across property lines or herbicide damage occurs, the need to act is urgent and the goals well defined. If, on the other hand, you are just generally concerned about possible health impacts to your children from playing on the neighbor's lawn, the issue is slightly different but still important. Concerns about water pollution or other environmental effects of pesticides need to be explained carefully and convincingly, noting that everyone can make a difference, even if it is small.

Getting started

Relationships between neighbors can range from friendly, cordial, and polite to antagonistic or handwaving basis only. Deciding how and when to talk about pesticides depends on the nature of the neighbor relationship and the personal reasons compelling the pesticide-free neighbor to broach the subject. In the case of pesticide overspray onto your property, a phone call or personal visit is certainly appropriate, and it is important to act quickly to document contamination. Contact

the Illinois Department of Agriculture (217-785-4754) to report any overspray or other potentially illegal outdoor pesticide application in Illinois.

For less serious situations, do whatever feels most comfortable. Having a chat while working in the yard can be a non-threatening way to break the ice. Another approach might be to invite a neighbor in for a cup of coffee or a beer. Whatever approach is taken, be polite and ready for any reaction, and be prepared to listen.



A positive approach is always more effective than one that puts people on the defensive. For example, mention a new lawn care service that doesn't use pesticides. Or suggest a new pest control product that is less toxic. That way, the talk turns to the alternative first, and the conversation can come around to the hazards later, perhaps as you explain why you made the choice you did.

There are no magic words that will get your neighbors to change their practices. The best advice is to remember that they very likely do not know much about the negative effects of pesticide use or about available alternatives. The general idea with these conversations is to "start where they are." This means putting yourself in their place and understanding not only why they are using pesticides, but also what will be an effective way for them to begin thinking about changing their yard-maintenance practices. Offering least-toxic substitute products can be an easy way to begin this, since many people equate killing pests with reaching for a spray bottle and healthy lawns with monthly visits from the spray truck. Just remember where they are coming from, and the conversation will be easier.



What to say

Keep it as simple and non-technical as possible. If your concern is primarily human health, focus on that as a starting point. Watch for their reaction as you talk, and if any point seems to play well, you can expand on it. Here are some ideas for topics that you might discuss:

Children are so much more vulnerable than adults are.

They are smaller, eat and drink more per pound, and have behaviors that put them at risk (playing on the grass, mouthing their hands, going barefoot, etc.) Their bodies are still developing, making them more susceptible to the health impacts of pesticides as well as less able to filter the toxins out of their system.



Pets are vulnerable to pesticides as well.

A study of dogs exposed to the most frequently used lawn chemical, 2,4-D, found that when dog owners applied 2,4-D more than four times a year on their lawn the incidence of common canine cancer (canine malignant lymphoma or CML) doubled. According to the National Cancer Institute, dogs with CML were 30% more likely to have lived in a home where the owners had applied 2,4-D or employed a commercial lawn company to treat their yard.

There's so much we don't know about pesticides.

Only the active ingredients are known, and they usually make up only a small percentage of the product. Full product formulations aren't tested for long-term effects. Exposures to multiple chemicals aren't considered.

Many effective alternatives are readily available.

More and more stores are stocking less-hazardous products for garden and lawn care. You can ask your neighbor what their major problems are and focus in on alternatives for those pests. For example, if their biggest problem is weeds, you can give them a copy of MPAC's fact sheet *Lawns We Can Live With*.

Many lawn care companies offer an organic or low-pesticide approach.

It's true. There are companies that offer or even specialize in a sensible approach to pesticides. If you have experience with a company, you might make a referral. SPCP has a list of lawn care providers who can offer alternatives on our web site, www.spcpweb.org/yardco.pdf.

Additional Tips

- › Begin where they are. Remember that they have a different perspective on pesticides, probably because they don't know much about them. Begin your conversation gently.
- › Avoid an accusatory tone. After all, perhaps there are things you do that annoy them!
- › Don't lecture them, have a conversation. Give them a chance to talk.
- › Listen to what they say. Don't get so wrapped up in planning your next point that you don't hear them.
- › Keep it friendly, avoid an accusatory tone.
- › Offer to bring them additional information, then follow up.
- › Read the companion fact sheets we've provided to increase your knowledge on the issues.

Let your Pesticide Free Zone sign break the ice

If you put up a Pesticide Free Zone sign in your front lawn, your neighbors or friends may ask about it and that will get the conversation started. Your neighbors may perhaps feel defensive if they think that the sign was put up to get their attention specifically. Or they may just be curious about why you garden the way you do or how you control pests without chemicals. In any case, wait a couple of weeks after you put up the sign and see if anything happens. If it doesn't, you can always start a conversation yourself by pointing out your new sign.



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Midwest Pesticide Action Center is dedicated to reducing the health risks and environmental impacts of pesticides and promoting safer alternatives.

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