

Lush Lawns, Pest-Free Homes . . . But At What Cost?

By Jennifer Wake

The Lamorinda area is well-known for its natural beauty, with its homes set amongst natural vegetation or perched near meandering creeks. But when homeowners are unaware of safer alternatives to toxic pesticides, keeping homes and gardens beautiful and pest-free can come at a cost to our health and the environment.

According to the Contra Costa County Agricultural Commissioners Office, the Lamorinda area contracts out one of the County's largest scheduled bi-monthly applications by pest control operators, underscoring an alarming trend of increased insect and weed eradication in more affluent areas.



Creeks like this one behind Chow in Lafayette, meander through much of Lamorinda and feed directly into the Delta and the Bay
Photo Jennifer Wake

Additionally, a report by the Pesticides Action Network North America (PANNA) and Californians for Pesticide Reform revealed that, in California, use of carcinogenic pesticides had more than doubled from 1991 to 1998, and that total pesticide use in 1998 was at the highest level ever reported. Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, rodenticides, and microcides (disinfectants) are all considered pesticides.

A former Cal/EPA investigator with a master's degree in public health, Moraga resident Susan JunFish understood some of the dangers of toxic chemicals. When she and her family moved to the area in 2002, she set out to enroll her 3-year-old son in preschool, but after visiting over 20 preschools, she saw many environmental hazards including pesticide use at the sites.

"I witnessed many preventable environmental hazards where children were being exposed to cleaning products and saw two incidents where pesticides were being sprayed as children were walking by," she said. "One local preschool was even exposing kids to lead by letting kids play inside old computer screen terminals. Staff often diluted bleach (sodium hypochlorite) incorrectly and used disinfectants improperly."

A 2004 study by the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine found that children exposed to pesticides or cleaning products, particularly under age one, are 2.5 to 4.5 times more likely to have permanent (chronic) asthma by the time they're five.

In August of 2002, JunFish founded the Parents for a Safer Environment (PfSE) – a grass roots organization dedicated to reducing preventable environmental hazard exposures to children. "I wanted to figure a way to inform and somehow reach out to preschools at large."

The majority of PfSE's work has been assisting public agencies such as local towns and school districts and the county to reduce the use of unnecessary pesticides and use safer alternatives. Their work has been mostly volunteer and partially funded by small grants from local, non-profit, county and state agencies.

Over the course of two years, PfSE worked with the Town of Moraga to implement an integrated pest management (IPM) plan, which was approved last year. Thanks to its implementation, parks in Moraga have the distinction of being one of the "least pesticides applied" areas in Contra Costa County. PfSE has also taken several calls from parents in Lafayette and Orinda who have witnessed spraying in their schools and parks, and hope they take the lead in pursuing IPM policies in their towns.

Although PfSE has helped facilitate changes in the Moraga parks and school district, JunFish says continued spraying around the shopping malls, apartment buildings and in single-family homes pose potential hazards.

"Most people are not aware how pesticides, especially when they are tracked indoors, could stay active for months inside a home and expose children," she said.



Parents for a Safer Environment founder Susan JunFish, MPH, smiles as children play at Moraga Commons. Her work has helped make parks and schools safer for children

Currently, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency relies on those who apply pesticides, including landowners, to decide whether or not they want to take the risk of using toxic pesticides. It is illegal for any pest control operators (such as True Green Chem Lawn, Terminex, Clark, etc.) to tell residents that pesticides are safe or non-toxic.

Additionally, JunFish says risk assessments that were used in the past to approve pesticides and many other chemicals were based on 30-year-old healthy white males.

"Now even the EPA is beginning to accept almost 10 years of accumulating research showing children are hundreds of times more susceptible to certain pesticides than adults," she said. "In proportion to their size, children breathe drink and eat more than adults and do not have the full set of liver enzymes that could help break down some toxins and, additionally, are more susceptible to pesticide exposure because they have more hand-to-mouth habits and play low to the ground."

Approximately one-third of the total pounds of pesticides used in California in any given year are known to be particularly toxic to humans, whether as immediate (acute) poisons, chronic toxins or both.

Every three years, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control biomonitor several thousand people randomly for numerous toxins, including pesticides. They are finding an increasing amount of pyrethroids – the number one pesticide family of choice currently used by pest control operators for insect control – in those tested.

"Like DDT was banned in the 1970s, pyrethroids will likely also be banned or strictly limited in use in the future," said JunFish. "If we don't curb our use of unnecessary chemicals of convenience, we will continue to see multitudes of chronic illnesses in ourselves, in pets, and in wildlife as a result."

So what can you do? PfSE suggests choosing least-toxic alternatives to get rid of pests, and limit fertilizer usage or change to organic fertilizers that are slow releasing.

For more information about Parents for a Safer Environment and information and links for solutions to abating or getting rid of almost any pest among other topics, visit www.pfse.net. PfSE is seeking a part-time staff person for research and advocacy work.



Moraga resident Sam Laudy, 21 months, plays without worry of toxic pesticide use on the grass at Moraga Commons

Photo Jennifer Wake



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