

Your immaculate lawn is killing the neighbourhood



by Stephen Mitchell

Has it ever occurred to you that nobody really looks too healthy anymore?

Environmental activist Dawn Mangillo, who spoke at York last week sponsored by the York University Greens, thinks so. Scanning the faces of her audience, she said, "I would bet that most people in this room right now are not in the best of health. I know I'm not."

This reporter, honking miserably into a kleenex throughout the noon seminar, nodded with blurry, swollen affirmation.

The problem, Mangillo said, begins with pesticides. Pesticides in our water, our food, our air. Yes, we have all been numbed into intellectual paralysis by statistics—but here's one more: Every year, over four billion pounds of pesticides are manufactured, according to the Pesti-

cide Action Network. That's almost one pound for every human being on earth.

Mangillo, the self-proclaimed "middle-of-the-road" element of the anti-pesticide movement, is virtually a barometer by which the devastating effects of pesticides can be measured. A particular physical sensitivity to pesticides nearly killed her three years ago.

Fortunately, Mangillo recovered—slowly—and began to mobilize whatever energy she had to wean her rural Waterloo neighbourhood away from pesticides. She has spent the last three years fighting a kind of "guerilla warfare" with her suburban professional neighbours. These people, reportedly, had a propensity for immense, immaculate, weedless lawns and were maintaining them in a far from organic manner.

Mangillo went through a period of anger, lashing out at regional

polluters. "I felt like quite the crank," she told the York gathering. And just to compound the tension, "My kids go to school with their kids!" she laughed. Last summer, having already filled countless mailboxes with her pamphlets, she started up a local branch of the Pesticide Action Group—aligning herself with similar efforts in seven other cities.

The thrust of Mangillo's current campaign is the effect of pesticides on food and children. As far as general health is concerned, she said, "Children under six are affected the most." Mangillo was particularly critical of governmental pesticide testing. Chemical compounds, she said, "are tested on full-grown men," but a pesticide deemed safe when tested on full-grown men might have a destructive effect on the delicate constitution of a child.

The roots of Mangillo's activism are rural, but she's come to view the pesticide problem as an urban one. At this time, Mangillo knows of only one Canadian city (Montreal) that has stopped spraying its boulevards and hydro right-of-ways. "It's a small step," she said of Montreal's decision, "but it's a significant one."

One participant in the seminar suggested doing away with urban lawns altogether, claiming that a radical about-face of this nature was recently undertaken in Texas. Mangillo tempered this remark by advocating methods of organic lawn management such as overseeding with clover, for the added nutrient that clover brings. Also, she said, "leave in the dandelions. Children love dandelions."

But the crux of the pesticide problem, for most of us, is not lawn management. We don't eat our lawns (well, at least I don't), but we do like to eat fruit and vegetables, and the documented evidence of the extent to which pesticides invade our food has put a deep crease in society's brow. The Pesticide Action Group suggests a diluted solution of pure dish washing soap and water for removing surface residues from fruits and vegetable. The group later confesses, however, that even the most diligent scrubbing, peeling or pummeling won't remove pesticides that are contained inside the produce.

The organic produce industry is looked upon by many as a solution. The produce doesn't always look as appealing as the glossy, flawless, commercial-perfect vegetables and fruits that have been protected with pesticides. Sometimes organic produce comes complete with worms. But the health benefits are undeniable, and apparently a sink full of cold water and salt is enough to persuade those worms out of your broccoli.

From Mangillo's perspective, all signs point to further development of all things organic. "There's no reason why we should be using insecticides," she said. "We don't need them." She pointed out that Ontario's long, frigid winters are the best insecticide we have, an advantage farmers in balmy Florida do not enjoy.

Unfortunately, Canada's ample output of organic fruits and vegetables is more often than not processed in the United States. We simply don't have the processing means yet, Mangillo explained.

Near the end of her talk, Mangillo, a classic idealist, drew a parallel between environmental awareness and world peace that opened up conversation among the audience. No possibility was left unturned. One participant warned against the use of indoor pesticides to fight cockroaches; another defended the presence of cockroaches in our daily life ("yes," someone else agreed, "they're entertaining!"). One woman spoke of the possibilities of a spiritual approach to land husbandry; Mangillo knew of farmers who had successfully "negotiated" with the worms assaulting their cabbages (apparently the worms responded positively to pleas like "please stay on the first cabbage in every row.")

Farmers who fall into step behind the organic movement, of course, will have to formulate their own methods of pest-control. The Pesticide Action Group has encouraged the rest of society to buy certified organically-grown food, stop using pesticides for household and garden pests, form citizen awareness groups and pressure the government and retailers for better consumer protection.

Mangillo, who has chosen not to deal with the government, said she believed most strongly in building up a network of consumers and farmers to create a solid foundation for the organic movement.

Mangillo has focused her earlier anger into workable energy. She now favours steady persuasion over rage. She believes, "You can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Still, she added ruefully, "our invitations to parties have dropped."



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