

The problem with pesticides

Is Surrey a city of toxic parks? Is that weed-killer you're putting on your lawn to make your grass look "healthy" actually planting the seeds of cancer in your children? Tom Zytaruk finds out.

Tom Zytaruk, Surrey Now
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Martin Harcourt's epiphany came in 1987, after applying some "Weed and Feed" to a grassy knoll.

"It was really early in the morning, the sun was out," he recalled.

Shortly after he put the chemical down, a lady came by, laid her baby on the grass and started changing his diaper.

Martin Harcourt serves on Surrey's environmental assessment committee. He says Surrey and its neighbouring cities and municipalities should ban the use of cosmetic pesticides. [View Larger Image](#) [View Larger Image](#)
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The groundskeeper gaped in horror, before taking the pair to get washed up.

"I said, 'I'm sorry.'"

That marked the end of pesticide use at Vancouver's Granville Island.

Harcourt, a Whalley resident, is in charge of keeping the trees and plants green and thriving there and proudly does so without using chemicals. Instead, he uses high-pressure water, a blowtorch or even his own hands to kill weeds.

"Baby skin is almost transparent compared to bark," he notes.

"Some pesticides – glyphosate is one – is painted right onto a tree's bark, and it'll penetrate through the bark and kill the tree. It's much tougher than human skin. All a child has to do is lean against a tree that's been

treated that way, and it'll be system-wide in that child as fast as it takes for his blood to run once through his whole system."

Harcourt serves on Surrey's environmental assessment committee, fighting pesticides.

"They stay in the soil for a long, long time and we really don't know what they're doing."

Some say they're causing cancer.

Surrey family physician Teresa Clarke, a long-time Cloverdale resident who works with cancer patients, will join Harcourt as a guest speaker at an information event at Semiahmoo Library at 10:30 a.m. Saturday sponsored by the Surrey White Rock Pesticide-free Coalition.

The coalition would like Surrey and its neighbouring cities and municipalities to ban the cosmetic use of pesticides, like the government of Ontario has decided to do province-wide.

Much closer to home, Port Moody in the 1990s banned residential cosmetic pesticide use to prevent chemicals from leaching into Noon's Creek.

"We want Surrey council to know that this is an issue that the community is really serious about," Dr. Clarke said. "In order to prevent cancer, we have to deal with the pesticide issue."

Clarke said studies show cosmetic pesticides – weed killers and other chemicals meant to make lawns and flowers look nice – are related to a variety of cancers and the Ontario College of Family Physicians recommends that people avoid them.

"The City of Surrey does not have a ban on cosmetic pesticides," Clarke noted. "Other cities and municipalities have done it. Studies done in Quebec show that when you measure the toxin levels in kids in areas where cosmetic pesticides are used, they are high. In areas where the cosmetic pesticides have been banned, they're not present. It shows up in the blood level of children."

Many pesticides for sale at nurseries and garden centres are not properly labeled, she maintains. "If they were labeled that this could cause cancer, nobody would buy it."

Some of the active ingredients in cosmetic pesticides not only cause cancer, but respiratory illness, neurological, and endocrinological problems and infertility.

They mess up your hormones," Clarke notes. "Pesticides are known endocrine disruptors."

Kids and pets are at the greatest risk. Clarke explains why.

"If you expose an 80-year-old to a lot of pesticide, by the time it plays out in their system, they're at the end of their natural life expectancy. But if you expose at a younger age, the likelihood of cancer of course increases, and that's why we are seeing cancer happening at younger and younger ages."

According to Harcourt, penetrants used to make pesticides work better are particularly troublesome because "those cause cancer for sure" but aren't listed on the labels.

"There's 72 banned chemicals that are supposed to be listed on the label and what pesticide companies have been doing is telling us that they're using their existing stock, and when that's done then they'll redesign the labels, and they haven't done it."

To illustrate how dangerous these chemicals really are, Harcourt offers personal evidence.

"Every nurseryman I know has a child that has cancer, or a heart murmur, or some kind of bone disorder," he said. "Every nurseryman I know (who) has been in the nursery business as long as I've been in landscaping, they all have one."

"Pesticides, chemicals, they're way too dangerous."

NO BAN HERE, YET:

When it comes to pesticides, where are we at, locally?

Jim McMurtry – a Surrey school teacher who lobbied Surrey council last summer to ban the use of a herbicide called Casoron, after spotting city workers applying it to a traffic island five metres from his Cloverdale home – says much has yet to be done.

Casoron's active ingredient is dichlobenil, which according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency "causes systemic, developmental and

reproductive toxicity effects in animal studies" and is possibly carcinogenic.

"There's no political will to rid the city of cosmetic pesticides," he charged.

The city's population is growing, he added, the problem is mounting and the city needs leadership on this.

"We're not getting it."

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts said she brought the issue of cosmetic pesticide use up eight months ago and the city's parks and recreation department is "having a look at it."

"I know that we stopped using a number of toxic pesticides," she said.

But so far, no ban.

"So far we've not been directed by council to take that approach," said Owen Croy, Surrey's parks manager.

Meantime, the Surrey school board last November directed staff to report back on "the options and costs to further reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides."

Doug Strachan, the school district's spokesman, said a more detailed report is to follow. Still, he added, the district has "dramatically reduced the use of chemicals in their entirety."

Delta does not have a ban on cosmetic pesticides either, but the municipality's parks superintendent Trent Reid said pesticides are no longer used on Delta's fields.

In White Rock, cosmetic pesticides are generally not allowed to be used but "may be" only on fine-turf sports fields, with signs being posted prior to their application.

But the city's mayor Judy Forster seems warm to the concept of a residential ban.

"I would definitely like to look into that," she said.