

The Way to Spray

The Wise Use of Pesticides

“As a tool of first resort, pesticides leave a lot to be desired,” says Fred Whitford. “They’re poisons. Products designed to kill weeds and bugs obviously present dangers to you, your family, wildlife and natural surroundings.”

Protecting the environment from misapplied pesticides begins with protecting yourself and your family first. Do it right, and the chances for adverse environmental effects are greatly reduced.

Whitford admits he’s hard-core about pesticide safety. He’d rather homeowners follow a recent trend in farming—hire a professional.

“Homeowners are very concerned about the dangers of pesticides, but they do little to protect themselves,” Whitford says. “The main question to ask is: ‘Do I read and follow the instructions?’ If the answer is no, you’re probably unsafe.”

Read the Label Once, Twice, Thrice

As coordinator of Purdue Pesticide Programs, Whitford has seen almost every wrong way to use a pesticide and not enough of the

right ways. To him, it’s as simple as reading the label: once, when you purchase the pesticide; again, when you’re ready to use it; and finally, when you go to get rid of it. “If you follow pesticide label instructions, you won’t have to worry about safety,” Whitford says. “If you don’t, we can’t give any assurance the pesticides won’t harm people, wildlife or the community.”

There’s a lot of handy information on the label that’s there to help people get the desired effects and avoid poisoning themselves or their family. The label indicates the minimum in protective clothing that should be worn, and it lists other information you’ll need to know to avoid accidents and emergencies.

Signal words give an indication of toxicity, ranging

from “caution” as the mildest to “warning” to “danger” as the strongest. “Route of entry” tells you how the pesticide might enter your body through skin, eyes or mouth, reinforcing the importance of wearing appropriate protective clothing and washing it separately after application. “Practical treatment” tells you how to respond with first aid. This could range from washing with soap and water to seeking immediate medical attention.

The EPA product registration number identifies the manufacturer and product. If you need to call a doctor or a poison center, they’ll want to know that number.

The label also happens to be a legally binding agreement you become party to when you purchase a pesticide. If you cause damage by

“Put ‘Mr. Yuck’ stickers on chemicals, and tell the kids what they mean,” says Purdue Extension pesticide specialist Fred Whitford, referring to the green-faced, grimacing character on the sticker from the Indiana Poison Center. “You might get the kids to help you put the stickers on and reinforce the message.” Under Mr. Yuck’s chin is the center’s toll-free help number: 1-800-382-9097. The stickers are available from the Indiana Poison Center, Methodist Hospital of Indiana, 1701 N. Senate Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202 (Phone: 317-929-2323)



not following the directions, you'll be liable.

If you still want to use a pesticide, then it's a case of choosing the right product, following the directions so you use it safely and properly disposing of any leftovers.

Picking a Pesticide

Besides reading the label, it's also useful to ask questions when picking a product. Pesticides differ by formulation, active ingredient, method of application and environmental fate—what happens to the chemical after it's applied. Many county Extension educators have been trained in pesticide application, and they can help confirm your diagnosis and select the least toxic treatment available.

Whitford recommends buying ready-to-use material that is already diluted and in its own applicator. "Ounce for ounce these are more expensive, but they are easier and safer to handle because you don't have to come in contact with the pesticide."

Don't buy more than you need. Leftover pesticides are no bargain. Not only do they lose effectiveness over time, the pesticides in the garage are more hazardous to your family's health than any residue on the lawn.

More than 2,000 cases of pesticide poisoning were

What You Can Do

Apply pesticides right to protect you, your family and the environment.

Ask questions before you pick a product.

Read and follow the pesticide label when you buy, use and get rid of the pesticide.

Buy and apply only what you need

Use "Mr. Yuck" labels to protect your kids.

Wear protective clothing.

Use pesticides up, or dispose of them properly and safely.

reported last year to the Indiana Poison Center. Half the victims were children under the age of six.

Nobody died, but nobody described the experience as pleasant either.

"The problem is we buy more pesticides than we can use right away, and then we don't store the excess like we should," says Whitford.

What you should do: use the material quickly. What you don't use you should lock away or at least put well out of the way of your kids.

The Safe Way to Spray

If you're suitably cautious, pesticides are a useful tool. For example, when you put pesticides on your lawn, they stay put—as long as you follow label directions.

"Research shows correctly applied pesticides rarely move more than a half inch down into the soil," says Zac Reicher, Purdue Extension turfgrass specialist. "Likewise, they rarely move horizontally because of the density of the turf. They get caught in the foliage, the thatch and the root systems."

Pesticide problems occur when homeowners apply for more than needed or apply where they shouldn't. "If you spread pesticides on the sidewalk, who knows where they go," Reicher says.

He tells of an over-zealous Indiana homeowner bent on controlling grubs. "He just poked holes in the pesticide bag and started spreading. Because the holes were too big, he soon ran out, so he got another bagful and spread it. That was way too

much chemical to put on a lawn.”

More is not better. “His lawn got eaten up except for where he dumped the pesticide, and he was out the cost of two bags of insecticide,” Reicher says.

Watch the weather. A hard rain soon after application could wash pesticides away—a waste for you and a blow to the environment.

Don’t spray if winds are high. Pesticides from your yard can wreak havoc if they drift.

Watch what you wear when you spray, too. Again, consult the label.

“Many homeowners don’t wear protective clothing, and they seem to think they are smart enough to keep themselves safe. But we know that those who don’t actively practice safety do injury to themselves and others with pesticides,” Whitford says. The right clothes—long-sleeved shirt, chemical-resistant gloves, long pants and safety glasses—can reduce personal exposure by as much as 95 percent.

The Rules on Disposal

National surveys show 25 percent of all home-stored pesticides remain unused on the shelf or under the kitchen sink for more than a year. Long-kept pesticides exposed to hot and cold will lose their effective-

ness. So use them up or dispose of them properly.

“Some homeowners wrongly dump pesticide products into the household trash or pour them into the sink, toilet, street, gutter, sewer or onto the ground,” Whitford says. “They practice ‘out of sight, out of mind.’” But those pesticides may wind up polluting lakes or rivers or streams.

“Household pesticide product labels generally will indicate that partially filled containers may be wrapped in several layers of newspaper and discarded in the outdoor trash. But for many people this option is neither acceptable nor environmentally sound.”

Whitford says unused pesticides are best disposed of by buying what you need and using it up. Then, rinse empty containers and discard them in the household trash so they are not reused. Farmers triple-rinse empty pesticide containers to make sure they’re safe for disposal.

Professional Option

Although there are ways to ensure safety when using pesticides, Whitford says the best method yet is to avoid using them.

“Don’t use pesticides if it is not necessary,” he says. “If it is necessary, find a reliable source of information, such as an Extension educator, to answer questions. If pesticides are needed for a lawn problem, consider hiring a professional lawn service. Lawncare companies have professionally trained staff who can manage your pests with little risk.”

