



SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: Moving to pesticide-free gardening

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Marblehead is a leader in organic lawn care for public spaces. As early as 2001, the town mandated that its public spaces be treated organically and managed without the use of toxic chemicals. Marblehead is often cited nationally as being one of the first towns to advocate for the elimination of pesticides by teaching organic lawn-care classes to hundreds of Marblehead residents.

Among the team bringing this innovation to our community was Chip Osborne, former chairman of the Marblehead Recreation & Parks Commission and owner of Osborne Organics, a company he founded to support and educate the land-care industry and public sector in alternative approaches to turf management. He blends science with hands-on experience to create safe, sustainable and healthy athletic fields and landscapes that do not involve the use of synthetic pesticides and chemical based fertilizers.

Osborne recently led a webinar for Sustainable Marblehead entitled “Pesticides 101,” with a second webinar, “Green Lawn Care,” following on April 25 at 4:30 p.m. Go to sustainablemarblehead.org for videos of these two presentations.

For 25 years, Osborne has followed an organic approach and has been designing strategies for public and private spaces for managing safe playing fields and more environmentally friendly residential properties.

In the webinars, he pointed out that pesticides are a quick fix for the instant gratification of a perfect-looking lawn and have taken the place of manual labor. They’ve been marketed as the only way to meet an expectation.

But he says, “Pesticides treat symptoms; they do not solve underlying problems.”

The current expectations we have for our lawns and landscapes were largely formed by the chemical industry in the 1950s and 1960s to sell products. The monoculture of cool-season grasses didn’t exist before these new expectations were created.

We need to change our expectations and learn to embrace biodiversity, according to Osborne. Green spaces don’t have to consist exclusively of lawns of non-native turf grass. As a society, we put grass where it doesn’t belong, and we should think of replacing it with more appropriate landscaping. Often, we put in grass when we don’t know what else to install.

“Just because something looks nice on an architect’s rendering doesn’t mean it’s the best choice for the space,” says Osborne.

What is now known as the typical American lawn started in post-World War II Levittown, New York. The deeds for every house in that town included a clause stipulating that property owners had to use pesticides and put in monocultures of cool-season turf grass so that all of the lawns looked alike — permanently pristine.

As a result of the increase of those types of post-war housing development landscaping rules, American homeowners now account for more pesticide use than the agriculture industry, all in the quest of a perfect lawn.

Chemical manufacturers are in charge of testing their own products, and they are only required to test the active ingredients in pesticides, which make up just a small percentage of the total product. The Environmental Protection Agency and independent third-party labs are not involved with testing initially.

Pesticides consist mainly of inert ingredients, however, which are not tested, and by law they don’t even need to be disclosed on the container. Therefore, when we purchase pesticides, we have no information on the potential harm from the inert ingredients. Many of these are more toxic than the active ingredient, according to Osborne, because their role is to enhance the “killing effect” of the product.

Regulatory agencies examine pesticides by evaluating the risks versus the benefits. If they determine that benefit (often economic) outweighs risk, the product can go to market. However, agencies evaluate products based on exposure for a 150-pound man. Testing does not take into account the effects of exposure on women, infants, toddlers or children.

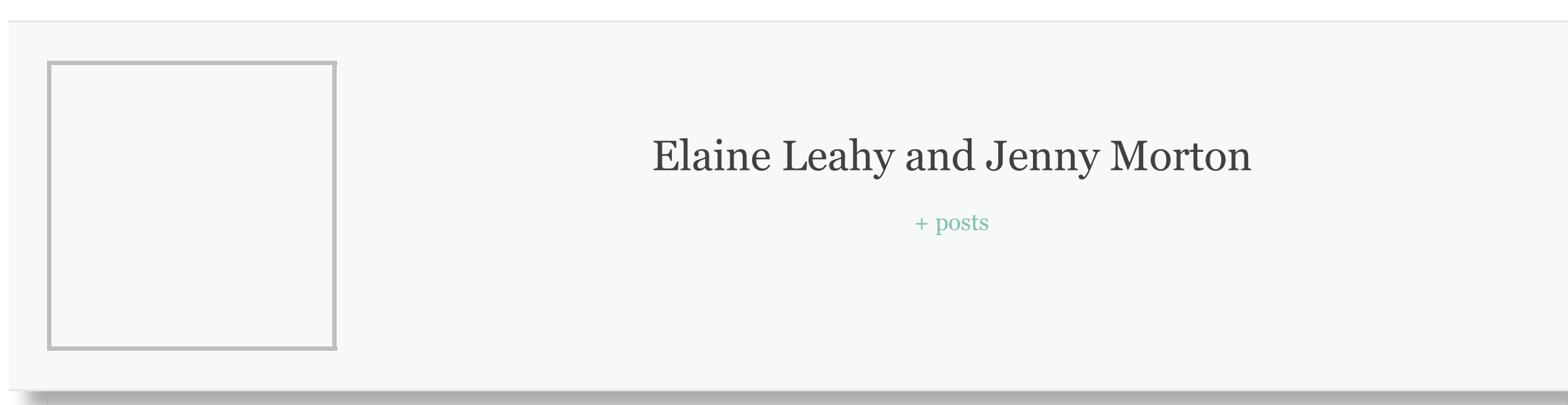
The half-life (the amount of time it takes for one half of the pesticide’s active ingredient to be completely broken down) of the most common products used in Marblehead is between 10 and 70 days, according to Osborne. Landscapers alert us to the dangers of chemically treated lawns by sticking a small, yellow caution sign in the grass. But we are told that it is safe for our families, children and dogs to use our lawns again after only 48 hours — too short a waiting time, says Osborne.

Current medical research strongly indicates that many of the products could be high risk at low doses for children and sensitive members of the population. Just some of health risks of chronic low-dose pesticide exposure are:

- Impaired cognition and behavior.
- Respiratory problems.
- Hormone disruption.
- Heart disease.
- Stroke.
- Cancer.

Osborne recommended that homeowners search for organic lawn care professionals and talk to their landscapers about reducing or eliminating toxic pesticides and synthetic fertilizers in support of human health and native pollinators.

Elaine Leahy and Jenny Morton are co-chairs of Sustainable Marblehead Conservation Group.



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