

As spring arrives, homeowners may consider pesticides for yard and garden work

ODA offers advice on home use pesticides

March 18, 2009... Now that Daylight Saving Time has arrived and the temperature will hopefully start to warm up a bit, homeowners are beginning an annual rite of spring, launching a major effort to get their yards in proper shape. Following winter and several months of yard neglect, many Oregonians are anxious to emerge from hibernation armed with the tools to reestablish healthy lawns and gardens. Among the tools– pesticides.

Home-use pesticides are important and often necessary in battling unwanted plant pests and diseases. Provided they are handled properly, pesticide products are valuable tools for the homeowner.

“Pesticides are not only valuable tools, they are powerful tools,” says Michael Babbitt, investigator with the Oregon Department of Agriculture’s Pesticides Division. “Anything that powerful makes it incumbent upon the user to exercise some responsibility whether they are licensed or not– whether anybody is looking or not. We want to make sure that if they have a pest problem and they are going to treat it themselves with a pesticide product, that they use those pesticides wisely and safely.”

ODA licenses commercial pesticide applicators, requiring them to take a test to show their knowledge of how to use pesticides safely. Many of the materials available to commercial applicators are available to homeowners, who are not licensed and tested. That's a concern and makes it all the more important for the agency to try and educate homeowners on proper use of pesticides.

"Neighborhood areas are full of people, children, and pets," says Babbitt. "There are a lot of potentially sensitive sites. People need to keep these factors in mind and make a good determination that the pesticide really is necessary– that they purchase the right one and use it properly."

Whether it is applying weed killer, slug bait, or bug spray, it’s always best to start by taking some time to think about what has to be done before you actually do it. Too many people rush out to prepare their yard and garden without a plan.

“Number one, identify the pest that is the problem,” says Babbitt. County extension offices, ODA’s Plant Division, the Internet, or even your local library all have resources to help you figure out what pest is literally bugging you. That’s important because each pesticide product lists the specific insects it is designed to control. The product label clearly states what the pesticide is to be used for.

Much of the homework can and should be done before purchasing the product. The most important source of information is the product label itself.

“We strongly advocate three steps,” says Babbitt. “Read the label, read the label and read the label.”

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The label tells you not only what pests the product takes care of, but it gives you special precautions. It spells out what steps you need to take to protect yourself and others during application. Babbitt says it's very important to read the label even before you buy the product so you understand if it is the correct pesticide for you and how best to use it.

After the purchase comes the application. Once again, reading the label will guide you through the proper method of handling the pesticide. It tells you how to mix the product. Some products may be already mixed but most need to be diluted before application. The label also tells you when to apply the product. Some pesticides require dry conditions, others do fine even if it rains afterwards. The label emphasizes the importance of keeping children and pets away from the material during mixing and application.

Once the pesticide has been applied, it's time for storage or disposal of the unused product.

Where can you find information on storage and disposal? You guessed it, the product label. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is another source, especially when it comes to pesticide disposal.

"As far as the storage of pesticides, store them in the original container in a safe, dry location that is out of reach of children," says Babbitt.

Of course the best way to solve a pesticide disposal problem is to not create one in the first place. It all goes back to the point of purchase.

"A majority of the time, people buy more pesticide product than they can probably use in their entire lifetime," says Babbitt. "Be prudent when you buy the pesticide product. Only buy the amount you intend to apply. That way you don't have storage or disposal becoming an issue."

ODA's Pesticides Division seeks to protect people and the environment from adverse effects of pesticides while maintaining the availability of pesticides for beneficial uses. In addition to licensing commercial pesticide applicators, the division registers pesticide products and regulates their sale.

"There is always the potential for pesticides to be misused and that's why the department strongly urges people to read the label and follow its directions," says Babbitt. "If the directions aren't followed, it could lead to adverse health effects or damage to other plants and property in the area. If someone uses more than what's called for, uses it someplace where it's not intended, or applies the product at the wrong time of year, it may well be that all bets are off when it comes to effectiveness or safety."

Sounds like a broken record. But that's how important the instructions are.

Home-use pesticides are available not only at garden supply shops, but at many one-stop shopping centers like Fred Meyer and K-Mart. They may be easy to find and easy to purchase, but that doesn't mean they should be treated lightly.

For more information, contact Michael Babbitt or Dale Mitchell at (503) 986-4635.