

# Recognize the Risk of Pesticide Use

by [Kristine Kowalchuk](#) | July, 2020 | Riverdale Community League

“There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields.... Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change.... There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone?... No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it to themselves.”

And so begins Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring*. Replace “town” with “community,” “America” with “Edmonton,” and the farms with the river valley. For the same thing happening in Rachel Carson’s book condemning pesticides nearly sixty years ago is happening right here, right now. It is no surprise that in early June, a neighbor brought me a fledgling sparrow that he had found on the ground of a neighbouring property. This baby bird had no visible wounds, yet twitched and was clearly not well. It ended up dying before we could get it to Wild North, who agreed that the death was likely due to pesticide poisoning.

In 2015, Edmonton passed a bylaw stating that pesticides could no longer be used on public lands for cosmetic purposes. There were numerous exemptions to the bylaw, including sports fields, to prevent the “slip risk” posed by dandelions. No matter that there is no scientific evidence that dandelions pose such a risk, while there is much scientific evidence linking pesticides to chronic diseases including cancer, as well as to the plummeting populations of bees and birds. In 2017, a city audit found serious issues with Edmonton’s pesticide use, including poor notification of the public before spraying and flaws in record-keeping of spraying that took place. Furthermore, use has increased: as the *Edmonton Journal* noted, “In 2016, city officials used 4,000 kilograms of 48 active pesticide ingredients to control unwelcome insects, weeds, rodents and fungi,” a 50% jump since 2010 ([edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/audit-citys-pesticide-policy-out-of-date-not-clearly-communicated](http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/audit-citys-pesticide-policy-out-of-date-not-clearly-communicated)). The city was also the last in North America to use a particularly toxic and persistent chemical called chlorpyrifos for nuisance mosquitoes, after purchasing Winnipeg’s stocks for nearly \$80,000. When the head of Pesticide Free Alberta FOIPed city pesticide spray sheets, she found that the spraying of chlorpyrifos had occurred until at least 2014 over Terwillegar Park (as well as the Enoch Cree Nation, and Sturgeon and Strathcona Counties), even though the product label clearly states that it is “not to be used near any home or in places such as parks, school grounds or playing fields” ([edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/mosquito-fight-puts-restricted-insecticide-near-homes-natural-areas](http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/mosquito-fight-puts-restricted-insecticide-near-homes-natural-areas)).

While the city finally sent its remaining stocks of chlorpyrifos to the Swan Hills waste disposal facility last summer, it continues to spray pesticides, including in the river valley. Last year, the city was found guilty of spraying an industrial-grade pesticide in a community, and had to pay (meaning taxpayers paid) a nearly \$15,000 fine

([edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/city-of-edmonton-fined-thousands-over-2016-industrial-grade-herbicide-use](http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/city-of-edmonton-fined-thousands-over-2016-industrial-grade-herbicide-use)).

In Riverdale, the community voted years ago to opt out of spraying on any of our public lands. (As a former city councillor noted, it is backward that communities should have to opt out, not in, of pesticide spraying.) Homeowners can also opt out of spraying on public lands 30 metres from their property – except, the city says, in cases of “pertinent need” ([edmonton.ca/residential\\_neighbourhoods/gardens\\_lawns\\_trees/pesticide-exemption-program.aspx](http://edmonton.ca/residential_neighbourhoods/gardens_lawns_trees/pesticide-exemption-program.aspx)). However, many homeowners do not know about the opt-out, and many others continue to use 2,4-D, Roundup and other chemicals on their lawns – oblivious, it seems, to the fact that these chemicals have been banned in other cities (including Montreal) and even whole countries, that despite their marketing they are anything but “green,” and that they are the focus of massive lawsuits in the U.S. and Canada, including one last year in which Monsanto, the maker of Roundup, was ordered by a California court to pay \$2 billion (later reduced to \$87.6 million) to a couple who developed non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma after using the chemical ([theguardian.com/business/2019/may/13/monsanto-cancer-trial-bayer-roundup-couple](http://theguardian.com/business/2019/may/13/monsanto-cancer-trial-bayer-roundup-couple)).

Nor are parks bordering Riverdale exempt from the spraying. In May, a fellow Riverdalian sent me a photo of city workers in hazmat suits, spraying pesticide around the stairs next to the Louise McKinney pavilion. Children play here, pets run here, wildlife and insects live here. A week later, I also witnessed families and dogs playing on the lawn in front of Concordia university right after it had been sprayed with pesticide; they did not see the tiny sign placed on the corner of the field and did not recognize the smell that drenched the grass. Children and pets are particularly vulnerable to these chemicals, as noted in this excellent *Men’s Health* article: [menshealth.com/health/a19543387/lawn-chemical-hazards/](http://menshealth.com/health/a19543387/lawn-chemical-hazards/)<sup>1</sup> As the article states, there is nothing wrong with lawn, but there is a lot wrong with a “perfect” lawn. Is it really worth risking your health and the health of your neighbours, pets, and wildlife for something you’ve been conditioned by chemical companies to see as desirable?

So what do we do to avoid being the community in Carson’s book?

1. Do not use pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Recognize that “-cide” means death-causing, and that pesticide use always has consequences. If you think Health Canada has your back and that chemicals must be safe because they’re allowed to be sold, think again. Health Canada has itself been the subject of a scathing audit on its chemical regulation ([theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/health-canada-agency-permitted-crop-pesticides-deemed-unsafe-audit-finds/article28401884/](http://theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/health-canada-agency-permitted-crop-pesticides-deemed-unsafe-audit-finds/article28401884/)). The same goes for the EPA in the U.S. The EPA itself was recently the subject of a lawsuit, for failing to recognize the risks of the pesticide dicamba: [theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/20/epa-faces-court-over-backing-of-monsantos-controversial-crop-system](http://theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/20/epa-faces-court-over-backing-of-monsantos-controversial-crop-system).

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<sup>1</sup> The only flawed statement in the article is that “Canada has taken a different approach” than the U.S.; Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick have done so, but the rest of us are as backward as the U.S.

2. Write to Councillor McKeen and the rest of city council ([council@edmonton.ca](mailto:council@edmonton.ca)) to say you support banning pesticide spraying in Louise McKinney and Dawson Parks (as well as a city-wide pesticide ban).

3. Eat your dandelions, all parts of which are highly nutritious. (Note that they even *sell* dandelion seed in Italy!) Also buy organic food. Did you know that Cheerios and Quaker oats were found to have Roundup residue on them? ([huffingtonpost.ca/2018/08/16/kids-cereal-cancer\\_a\\_23503404/](http://huffingtonpost.ca/2018/08/16/kids-cereal-cancer_a_23503404/)).

4. If you have not yet done so, read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. This should be required reading for everyone who eats and breathes.

The Riverdale Sustainability film for July is the 2017 documentary *American Experience: Rachel Carson*. It is available for viewing through Amazon Prime. The link will be posted on the new Riverdale Sustainability Facebook group page, which all are welcome to join.