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Janet Laminack: Identify problem before using any chemicals to treat yard problems

By Janet Laminack Horticulture Commentary

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Before using any chemical-based product to treat problems in and around your yard, identify the problem first so that the right product is used or if something organic can be used.

Courtesy photo

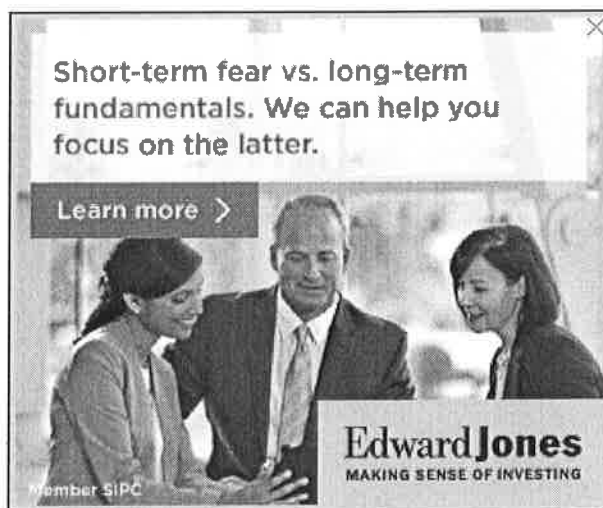
As a county extension agent, I am tasked with providing research-based education to the citizens of Texas. Sometimes this means that

I have an unpopular answer for people. It has been interesting throughout my career to see the shift in public perception and the framing of questions specifically when it comes to pesticide use.

A pesticide is a substance intended to control insects or other pests of cultivated plants (herbicides kill weeds, insecticides kill insects, fungicide kills fungus, etc.). In my earlier days, I would receive phone calls describing an insect attack on a tree with the question being, “What do I spray on it?”



Janet Laminack



However, my role is to provide more complete information so that consumers are informed to make a decision that they are comfortable with and that is horticulturally sound. Although the consumer typically might just want a chemical name of something they could go purchase, they are also going to get a bit of an education in integrated pest management, or IPM.

IPM is an approach to controlling pests by using many methods with the “last resort” being the use of a substance or chemical. These substances can be synthetic or organic but are all considered pesticides. Organic pesticides tend to be derived from natural sources rather than man-made.

Basically, IPM is best management practices to improve the health of the plants and limit the impact by pests. Here are some specific methods with examples:

- Cultural control is the manipulation of the environment to make it less favorable for pests. Examples are crop rotation or using disease resistant plants.
- Biological control is the suppression of pest damage by purposeful manipulation of beneficial organisms. This can mean buying ladybugs or other predators to release in your garden.
- But it can include waiting to spray aphids in the spring so that the neighborhood ladybugs have time to find the yummy treat.
- Mechanical control is using physical barriers or methods and works better in smaller gardens. Examples include using sticky traps for insects or even netting or cloth.

And that leaves us with chemical control, which is becoming less and less popular among consumers. It is a common myth that agriculture causes much of the pesticide pollution in our water and environment. However, when deciding to use a pesticide, agricultural producers consider the economic benefit. How many insects can be tolerated before the crop declines so much that it is worth the cost of a pesticide? Households tend to be less judicious. How many cockroaches can be tolerated? Usually less than one.

Problems occur when households use more pesticides or even products like “Weed & Feed” than needed on their yards. When we get a big rain, the excess floats away down into our waterways and streams. Another common problem is not correctly identifying the pest and therefore not correctly picking the correct pesticide.

For example, take-all root rot is a common disease in turf grass. Using an an

insecticide is not going to help control this because it is a fungus.

Before spraying or hiring someone to spray your house or lawn, identify the problem first. We can all do our part to protect pollinators, our watershed and other natural resources. If you need help figuring out what the problem is, contact us at master.gardener@dentoncounty.com or 940-349-2892.

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