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## **Gardening with a conscience**

A growing awareness leads to the use of less-toxic pest controls

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**W**HEN Ken Arcia first spotted aphids on his roses, his instinctive reaction was ``to blast those roses with something that would work really fast."

The Hayward resident headed for his neighborhood nursery intent on a chemical cure. There, the nurseryman steered him away from the harsher chemical solutions and Arcia took home insecticidal soap.

``The soap worked; it's better for the environment; and I'm very happy with the whole thing," Arcia says.

This is the new face of gardening -- kinder, gentler pest control.

Where super-strength, broad-range pesticides were once the solution of choice, savvy gardeners are now reaching for less-toxic pest controls that do the job without the arrogance of overkill.

It makes sense: Why use a cannon to kill a flea? Or an aphid? Diazinon will kill aphids, but diazinon also kills beneficial insects and birds, contaminates the waterways, and especially affects aquatic species in the bay, delta and creeks.

``Less-toxics are now a trend," says Ron Kanemoto, general manager at Yamagami's Nursery in Cupertino. ``We are finding a great interest among customers when they are presented with an opportunity to use these less-toxic controls. They jump at the chance to use safer products."

The kinder, gentler toxics have been around for years. But Bay Area nurseries now are expanding their product offerings and encouraging buyers to check them out. Fueling this trend is the ``Our Water, Our World" program by the Bay Area Clean Water Agencies, a group of more than 20 regional stormwater and waste water agencies.

In its second year at local hardware stores and garden centers, the group encourages retailers to offer choices and provides training if needed. Many nurseries already carried many of the less-toxic products and others were willing to expand the range they stocked.

Some 17 stores in Santa Clara County and 80 stores in the greater Bay Area now participate in the program.

### **Matter of location**

These numbers may not sound like much when you think of all the chains and stores selling pesticides. But Geoff Brosseau, executive director for the Bay Area Stormwater Management Agencies Association says it is not a matter of how many stores, but the type of store and location in every community.

“The first year we had four stores regionwide, now we have close to 100,” Brosseau says. “A good yardstick is whether the public has relatively convenient access to this information on less-toxic pest controls.”

A report evaluating the first year's efforts shows sales of less-toxic products increased 19 percent while sales of toxic products dropped 12 percent.

Kanemoto says the figures are far higher at Yamagami's.

“I'd say 85 percent of what we sell is less-toxic chemicals, and 15 percent is the stronger stuff,” Kanemoto says.

The drop in toxic product sales included diazinon and chlorpyrifos sold as Dursban -- two common home and garden pesticides that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has identified as major pollutants of the bay and urban creeks throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Runoff from lawn, garden and home use is one of the main sources of diazinon and chlorpyrifos pollution, so it is important to use less-toxic products in the home, experts say.

“These results help confirm what clean water agencies have believed all along,” says Phil Bobel of the Environmental Compliance Division of the Regional Water Quality Control Plant in Palo Alto. “If given helpful information right in the store and employees educated in the use of less-toxic products, people will make safer environmental choices.”

Kanemoto agrees. “We don't tell people, ‘Don't buy that, buy this instead.’ We ask, ‘What is your pest problem?’ and then show the various alternatives that can be used. This program and training is really what we need as a nursery to provide our customers with the latest product information,” he says. “That ultimately means we are providing better service to our customers.”

### **Simple solutions**

Arcia's problem with aphids is a common one in the summer garden. Gardeners also struggle with mildew and black spot on roses, mites on fruit trees, ants indoors and out, snails and slugs among the vegetables, and disease in the lawn.

In addition to the hard-core chemicals for these problems, less-toxic cures include such simple solutions as using water straight from the hose to blast aphids from plants. Insecticidal soap, sticky barriers, row covers and traps are among the list of less-toxic choices that are finding favor with home gardeners.

“We probably can't change the world overnight. And this will be a long process,” admits Bart Brandenburg, pollution-prevention program superintendent of the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District.

“But the less-toxics we recommend now will not be tomorrow's problems. For instance, we don't recommend pyrethrin-based products because those pesticides, we believe, will be tomorrow's problems,” he says. “There always seems to be another chemical on the market to replace one that is removed from the market.”

Consumers looking for a nearby store involved with “Our Water, Our World” can call 1-888-BAYWISE for more information. A series of fliers on less-toxic practices is available at participating stores or by calling the information number.

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