

7-2-10 An Explosion of What Have You

It is a spring and summer of excess, or so it seems. Cold and hot, wet and dry. And now the excess of plant and animal life reminds us every day who or what is more powerful. Acorns, pinecones, mice, voles, chipmunks, snakes, hawks and foxes aplenty, all after the other. It is the time of the tiger Lilly and the year of the hydrangea, especially the blue ones. Everywhere you go, they are there: white, purple, pink, lace cap, blue and oak leaf. Wild strawberries are abundant, when I thought they were a rare delicacy. It seems an explosion of natural resources is unfolding and growing before our eyes every day.

And then there are the unwanted and unintended explosions. As the insects multiply, it is tempting to turn to pesticides as the solution, especially when the invasion has settled in your home. Insects, such as fleas, bring the unwanted flare-up of jumping, crawling and scratching. Turning to the “fog” or pesticide “bomb” to treat your home can lead to unintended actual explosions.

Who reads the fine print when they are desperate? The can might say “Do not use more than one can per room” but did you read how many square feet it treats? A typical pesticide bomb might cover 7,000 cubic feet. Your 12 by 12 bedroom with a 7 foot high ceiling has only a little over 1,000 cubic feet. A typical basement might only be 6,000 cubic feet.

The fine print on a can of pesticide spray, intended to be left spraying in a closed room, also instructs the user to shut off such things as the stove pilots and the heating system. Do you know why it is so important to shut off heat and sparking sources? I did not until recently when I was speaking to one of my favorite entomologists, Richard Pollack. (Sorry, Richard, I have do have two others. More on those bug guys another time!)

Dr. Pollack explained to me that when the can of pesticide bomb is released, a fog of fine particles is released and released and released, until is gone. If the level of particles becomes too dense, a dust of sorts, results that can easily be ignited. The source of ignition might be a light switch, a thermostat or utilities with automatic on and off cycles, such as air conditioning. A mechanical source of friction might be a ceiling fan.

I know, I know. At this point, I, too, am reminded of Jim Carrey doing his Fire Marshal Bill act, exhorting and demonstrating, with neck tendons stretched out, “Just suppose...” Comedy skits are funny when they are plausible but exaggerated just enough that we can tell ourselves that it won’t exactly be like that; so, it’s okay to laugh.

But I’m not exaggerating about the pesticide foggers. Try to prevent the need for them but if you do decide to use them, read the fine print and follow the instructions. It could save a life or your home.

Also, if you do use a pesticide fogger, even according to the directions, leave notes on your exterior doors stating, “Do not enter; chemical fogger in use”. Don’t state the time; no need to advertise your return but, if your key-holding family members decide to visit or your fire alarms go off, emergency personnel know what to expect.

The Fire Department has the main response-ability when it comes to any of these dust explosions, whether they are at flour warehouses or sugar refineries or greenhouses, or homes with pesticide bombs. Our good housekeeping and safety practices can save their lives by preventing the catastrophe. They have enough to worry about at this time of year with fireworks going off.

Have a happy and safe Fourth of July!

For those wanting to know more about dust explosions, here’s a video on the response to a sugar refinery explosion in 2008. It is 29 minutes long and it contains testimony by our local chemical engineer, Amy Spencer. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3d37Ca3E4fA>

That’s a long one but if you want to see a short video showing how safety training was done in 1943, see this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2TkmxnC_J0 In just a couple minutes, Fred shows Mary Brown how to use the drill press.

We have made progress and we need to continue to do so!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, Ma. She welcomes your outbursts and inflammatory suggestions and explosive stories at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us