

8-13-10 Let's Ask Questions

My father always told me that it doesn't hurt to ask. While I have found that is not 100% true, it is mainly true and with those odds I have decided to ask our Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program and Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) if we can conduct some research to test the efficacy of organic botanical insect repellants. I have been hearing some very impressive first person testimonials from trustworthy people about some of these products. While avoiding promoting actual brand names I can point to the type of product.

These people, who are telling me about organic pesticides, tell me that they have even stopped using those propane fueled gadgets that act like a magnet for mosquitoes. And those things work! They attract and trap countless mosquitoes. In fact, they are so successful that in the spring, the owners are emptying bags full of dead mosquitoes every week and as the season progresses, the bags have fewer and fewer, down to none, because the bugs are no longer there. Those machine are affordable to everyone, though and they require an energy source, electricity or propane; two commodities also unaffordable to many.

Now, I am hearing from the organic pesticide proponents and users who tell me they do have the gadget but gave up the use of it because it was no longer needed after spraying their yard with plant based "juice".

One company sells their product for .home users to use in their yard with a pump style sprayer. The repellant is concentrated organic garlic juice and it is mixed with water. For about twenty two dollars you can get started for covering an acre for four to six weeks. That's enough time and spray to know if you are having the desired impact. For about eighty five dollars you get enough to cover an acres and a half for the whole season. It does leave an odor of garlic lasting from a half hour to two hours. That is a desirable bonus if you love the tasty bulb and you could spray right before dinner to impress everyone with your authentic Mediterranean cuisine. Or, you would be briefly inconvenienced by the odor or even repulsed, if like my brother in law, you can't tolerate the odor.

Another product also sounds delicious with essential oils from rosemary and clove. Some prefer peppermint. My son's girlfriend told me she'd rather smell garlic than peppermint! Another member of the mint family has received accolades but it might be comical to see the effect on our feline friends: catmint. That could be a very happy world; no mosquitoes and cats purring, rolling around and acting silly.

Now, I was seeing that, even when trying to do a good thing by using organic plant repellants rather than chemical pesticides, we still can't please everyone. So, as usual, we do the best we can with informed choices.

I'm still at the information gathering stage. This got me thinking, though. Maybe we can each use in our own yard, the eco-friendly product of our choosing, minty, herbal or garlic, and maybe we can avoid the need for aerial spraying by protecting human health in many small locales, even though the mosquitoes are still in the swamps. Could the use of these products have a cumulative effect? I hope so. I know that it is far more affordable than buying many bottles of

potentially dangerous stuff off the store shelves. I am going to begin my own experiment starting this week and I'll continue next year.

Right now is bad timing because the aerial spraying did make a difference. My little experiment will also have the weakness of subjectivity. I want some objective numbers and I want to see the numbers where it will get our attention; namely, the swamps.

It is our maple and cedar swamps where bad ol' *Culiseta melanura* hangs out, beginning the cycle of Eastern Equine encephalitis. What if our MDPH and the Mosquito Control Program were willing to add a few traps. If they added another far away from the existing trap in the same swamp but in a similar environment and counted the mosquitoes each week, they could see if each trap caught similar numbers and species of mosquitoes. Then, just as the numbers were rising, one trap was surrounded by, say, the garlic spray. Then, the trap monitoring would continue. The distance between traps and the spray zone decisions would have to be informed by the experts so that too much or too little or too close or too far did not interfere with the measurements. What if the trap within a zone of garlic spray that previously caught the same number of mosquitoes as its control trap, now caught none? Wouldn't that be impressive and wouldn't you want to spray your yard with it? I would.

I'll let you know the response to my question. They might laugh. They might think I'm crazy. They might tell me it is not in their budget. But it won't hurt to ask.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. Would you like to see some scientific research on safer alternatives to the current pesticides? Contact her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us