

8-11-17 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 been asking about the efficacy of organic botanical insect repellents. 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 insect repellents, 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 machines are not affordable for everyone, though, and they require an energy source, electricity or propane; two commodities also unaffordable to many.

I am even hearing from the organic repellent 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 for application in their yard with a pump style sprayer. The repellent 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 acre and a half for the whole season. It does leave an odor of garlic for an hour or so. 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.

A non-garlic product that also sounds delicious uses essential oils from rosemary and clove. Some people 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: yup, catmint. That could be a very happy world; no mosquitoes or ticks and cats purring, rolling around and acting silly.

As I asked questions, I began to see that even when trying to do a good thing by using organic plant-based repellents 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 spraying pesticides by protecting human health in many small

locales, even though the mosquitoes are still in the swamps and the ticks are still in the woods. Could the use of these botanical products have a cumulative effect? I hope so. I know that it is far more affordable and more desirable than buying many bottles of potentially dangerous stuff off the store shelves.

I would like to conduct an experiment but it could have the weakness of subjectivity. I want some objective numbers and I want to see the numbers where it will get our attention. I would like to see a reduction in ticks for they are carrying too many serious diseases and there isn't a month that goes by without tick borne diseases being reported.

The experiment should begin with some baseline numbers. Stake out two areas for our experiment. One is to be treated and the other is to be left alone. Guestimate a distance between the two areas that will be far enough so that the non-treated area cannot be affected by your spray. Stay down wind of the non-treated area.

Using a soft white cloth, drag it along the grass, especially near the edge of the woods and in shady areas. Do the same along low shrubs and tall grass/hay. Count the number of ticks found and release them back to where they were found. I know; it is so tempting to toss them in a fire, right? But this is research!

Then apply the natural repellent of your choice. Wait an hour and "drag" the area again. Any difference?

Another method of testing the efficacy would be to dress in white or tan pants with white tube socks pulled up high over the pants. Walk through the same environments known to be tick friendly and then conduct your tick check. Count and release. Walk at least twenty five feet away and spray your pant legs and socks with the repellent and walk the same test area. Results?

What if a zone of garlic or mint and rosemary spray that previously picked up ticks, now caught none? Wouldn't that be impressive and wouldn't you want to spray your yard or clothing with it? I would.

Keep in mind, though, that repellents only repel. It is pesticides that kill. So, while taking precautions with these botanical products, please don't allow a sense of security to cause you to skip the all-important tick check. And ask for help with the tick check, also, because, you know, it doesn't hurt to ask.

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