

“Pesticide ban is here” by Staff, The Cape Breton Post, April 3, 2011.

“Do you dream of a perfect emerald lawn, stretching out in glorious, unbroken vistas, edged in a slightly bevelled edge at the sidewalk? It’s a lovely dream. You may want to keep that close to your heart, along with pedal-pushers, penny candy, and roller skates with metal wheels.”

That’s the introduction to a web page by HMK Consultants outlining ways to keep a lawn relatively weed-free without cosmetic pesticides. It was written when the City of Toronto implemented its cosmetic pesticide ban in 2006.

It appears as if the point of the tongue-in-cheek reference to the 1950s is that the “perfect” lawn belongs to that era and not this one.

That “innocent” decade was a time when cigarette smoking was truly “cool,” when drinking and driving was commonplace, and seat belt use was infrequent if seat belts were available at all.

Sixty years later, cigarette packages are about to feature ever more graphic photographs such as a lung cancer patient on her deathbed; drivers registering between 0.05 and 0.07 on a breathalyzer test for the first time face a seven-day licence suspension; and more than 90 per cent of occupants of “light-duty vehicles” in Canada buckle up.

What were cultural norms a couple of generations ago have been turned on their head.

The same goes for the “perfect” lawn, heavily dependent on cosmetic pesticides, fully embraced in the years following the Second World War when cookie-cutter suburbs were springing up all over North America.

Over the decades, as the innocence around chemicals has been lost, governments have implemented bans on cosmetic pesticides. Nova Scotia joined the long lineup on April 1 with a province-wide ban.

Now, Nova Scotia residents can only use pesticides such as Roundup and Sevin on lawns and ornamental plants if they’re trying to eradicate an invasive species such as Japanese knotweed, poisonous plants such as poison ivy, insects that cause structural damage such as carpenter ants, or insects that can be a health concern such as European fire ants.

There will likely be homeowners who tell vendors they have a invasive species on their property, when they don’t, and buy a prohibited pesticide to use on a non-invasive species. There will also likely be those who buy restricted pesticides elsewhere and apply them under the cover of darkness.

The new ban is more about educating Nova Scotians about the potential health implications (to humans, animals and plants) of applying cosmetic pesticides to get a lawn that looks like a golf course or a garden that looks like the cover of a seed catalogue.

As with cigarettes, drinking and driving, and seat belt use, the cultural shift of returning to organic approaches and re-defining a “perfect” yard will take time. But people (and the planet) will be better for it.