

The Garden Corner, By: Art Kammerlohr, Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

The last few months we have been talking about “growing native”. Making the decision to pursue this type of gardening often brings about an elementary change in the cultural practices we have employed in the past to raise our flowers, fruits, and vegetables. It would seem to me to be impossible to make the switch to “growing native” without seriously considering our use of pesticides. There is not a gardener or farmer who is not well aware of the harmful side effects of these hazardous chemicals we intentionally introduce into the environment be that in the air, soil, and water. At your leisure read the cautions placed on the product container. Invariably we are told to keep our pets and children clear of the areas having been treated. Often there is an admonishment not to apply on a windy day so as to preclude unnecessary spread. And, if the manufacturer has been completely honest, a warning of the possibility of ground water contamination is included. Do these warnings give you pause? They do me! What then are we to do in combating the annual onslaught of the pests determined to ravage our plants and crops?

A change in our mind set might be a good place to start. By that I mean we can make a conscious decision about how much damage to our plants we are willing to accept before turning to our chemical arsenals. Practicable methods to pests control would be another area to consider. What about companion planting? For example: Plant dill to deter aphids, spider mites, squash bugs, and cabbage loopers. Or, use petunias to run off leafhoppers, Japanese beetles, aphids, and asparagus beetles. By mid to late summer the aphid populations have taken up residence in many of our plantings. Simply hand washing away the offending critter works really well. So does hand picking the tomato horn worm from the leaves of our tomato plants; and, the worms make wonderful fishing bait for bass, blue gill, and catfish! Many of our annual plant predators lay next season’s eggs in the soil or deposit them on low hanging leaves. To disrupt their survival cycle all we need to do is rotate our crops or discard the infected leaves by burning them. A good season’s ending cleaning of our gardens and flower beds will deal a fatal blow to many an intruder. A well-stocked nursery will offer egg casings of beneficial insects like lady bugs, parasitic wasps, and praying mantis. These three “good” bugs have ravenous appetites and are well worth the expense. Another alternative to pesticide use could be ordering and planting species particularly designed to deter disease and pests— That’s how this entire discussion got started: Native plants have evolved to protect themselves from not only diseases; but, from pests as well.

Without the least bit of embarrassment this article has been a plea to encourage all gardeners to consider limiting and/or eliminating entirely the use of pesticides. There are a few more cultural practices we could adopt to assist us in our newly discovered trek toward a more environmentally friendly approach to our growing habits. If you would like more information, write: 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email: mandpak@embarqmail.com and I’ll provide more. One last thought: By spraying we not only kill the “bad” bugs; but, we get the “good” ones too. In our pursuit of the perfect plant or vegetable, or fruit, we also take out the toads, frogs, lizards, harm the birds, and kill many of the microorganisms in the soil. Does that seem like a good trade off to you?