

HOT AIR

Yellow Lawns

By Barbara Currier Bell

It must be summer: little yellow things are popping up all over Milford's lawns. No, not dandelions—lawn treatment tags. You know, the warnings landscapers post: "Danger—chemicals. Don't let children or pets play here." And for every yellow alert, many more lawns are chemically treated by owners themselves, without the tip-off. According to the EPA, 78 million pounds of chemicals are sold to homeowners for yard care: that, plus commercial applications, says the National Gardening Association, adds up to \$38.4 billion, or, for the average yard-owner, \$457/year. This implies an awful lot of toxic turf in Milford, or any other city dominated by lawns. So it's good news to hear, recently, from media sources such as [Prevention](#), the [CT Post](#) and the [Christian Science Monitor](#) (which noted our ECC's Freedom Lawn program), that more and more of the country's huge business in yard care is going organic. Still, we need to take a closer look at this trend.

Some harmful and misused chemicals, such as DDT and malathion, have been taken off the market. Their replacements aren't necessarily harmless, though, because "organic" isn't defined by a federal standard. Diazinon, for instance, is a pesticide legislated to disappear after 2004. It was a major ingredient in Scott's anti-insect Turfbuilder. Scott has substituted the pesticide "bifenthrin" instead. Bifenthrin can be labeled "organic" because it's a manufactured cousin of a naturally-occurring compound (pyrethrum) found in certain chrysanthemums, and used for two centuries as a home remedy against insects. The pyrethrum family of chemicals is

less toxic to humans than diazinon, and it doesn't get into groundwater, but it lasts longer in the environment than diazinon and is more toxic to fish and crustaceans. This is a big problem, given that 66% of the polluted runoff to Long Island Sound comes from lawns. There's no free lunch (and if your favorite lunch was a local lobster roll, it's history).

Not only can organic yard-care substitutes be harmful, they can lead to a false sense of security. Americans already way over-apply chemicals, thinking twice as much will ensure twice the benefit. This misunderstanding will be exacerbated by a belief that "organic" means "OK."

So search out the new organic yard-care products and try them, but be careful. Remember, too, that chemical fixes of any kind are expensive. The best solution is to be patient, tolerate a little imperfection. Let Nature do the work. Certain planting practises, not to mention ladybugs, can deter many pests. Fertilizing with home-made compost, siting trees and bushes strategically to conserve water and attract birds, letting a lawn find its own limits, and putting in appropriate native grasses or plants are the real keys to a healthy yard. Weeds? Try hot water—a splash from your morning coffee or tea? Besides, who cares if clover, ajuga, or other ground covers sneak into the grass? Dandelions are a prettier yellow than those nasty warning tags anyway.