



Seacoast stores remove chemical products from shelves

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YORK, Maine — Eldredge Lumber and Hardware and Kittery Ace Hardware, both owned by York resident Scott Eldredge, are leading the way in removing popular insecticide and herbicide products from their shelves while significantly increasing their organic sections.

The stores have banned systemic insecticides like neonicotinoids, as well as glyphosate products, a broad-spectrum herbicide commonly known to consumers by the Monsanto trademark name Roundup. Organic products have been moved toward the front of the store, chemical products toward the back.

Eldredge is considering other chemical products for removal, and those products already in stock but not on the shelves are now in storage. Moving forward, he looks to the day when customers clamor for organics alone and he can be rid entirely of “really dangerous” chemical products.

“To a degree I worry about the economic sense of it,” he said of the transition he’s making. “But it comes down to what I feel is right and what I feel is wrong. I can only do so much, but I’m going to do what I can.”

Eldredge’s partner in this venture is store employee John Bochert, a 25-year veteran of the greenhouse business who worked at Coastal Landscaping in York for many years. Bochert was hired two years ago to begin the transition away from chemicals.

“There’s an organic method to just about whatever chemical is out there,” said Bochert. “It’s not necessarily product-oriented. It’s an integrated way of looking at soil. Healthy plants require healthy soil and healthy soil requires healthy organisms in the soil. Chemical insecticides either damage the microbes or do nothing to enhance them.”

The decision to remove Roundup was made in conjunction with the introduction of a horticultural vinegar, four times as strong as household vinegar, that offers the same results.

Neonicotinoids are a good example, said Eldredge, of the systemic use of chemicals in our food. Typically spread on seeds to make plants insect resistant, it has been linked in studies to a reduction in the honey bee population. For instance, a 2013 study in "Pest Management Science" indicated that exposure to neonicotinoid dust spread during planting of corn in Ontario, Canada, was suspected to have caused up to 70 percent of honey bees' deaths in that region.

Eldredge and Bochert are working toward reducing their garden plant inventory grown with seeds sprayed with the chemical and increasing their own organically grown plants. Bochert said the company has a 10,000-square-foot organic garden and a 100-foot greenhouse, with another greenhouse anticipated. They grow a selection of hanging plants, vegetable and flower seedlings and herbs that are for sale at the stores.

Both men point to their involvement in the campaign in neighboring Ogunquit to ban pesticide use on all private and public property in town. They were active in supporting the ordinance, which passed by 60 percent of the vote last November. Through that effort, they met Jay Feldman, executive director of the pesticide control policy organization Beyond Pesticides.

"When he told us what we were doing other retailers across the country aren't willing to do, that's when we knew we were into something serious and exciting," said Eldredge.

Feldman holds by that assessment.

"Scott is on the leading edge of a trend in responding to a community-based grassroots effort to restrict pesticide use in communities," he said, saying he knows almost no hardware stores or garden centers in the country that have made the same commitment. "What's critical about what Eldredge's is doing is that they recognize people want to have a nice lawn and that there are practices that can be adopted to achieve that without toxic chemicals."