

Make Your Own Community Healthier

John Muir is supposed to have said that every time you pick up a stick you find it hooked to everything in the universe. You needn't think as cosmically as Muir to see how the choices you and your neighbors make in your own yards and neighborhoods affect the environment for salmon and wildlife and the health of your own friends and family. So do your community's landscape practices in its parks, roadside and greenbelts.

Insist that agencies cut back on pesticide use

Scientists have tested scores of streams, lakes and rivers in our region. And in almost every water body they tested, they have found pesticide contamination. Chemicals used by cities, agriculture, homeowners, schools, and businesses routinely find their way into surface water. (In fact, urban and suburban pesticides find streams more easily than agricultural ones, due to the prevalence of concrete and asphalt to carry them along.) Most Northwest cities and counties still use pesticides in managing their properties, including parks and roadsides. However, growing community support for healthier habitats has led some cities and counties to cut back or even stop using the most toxic pesticides.

What you can do:

Your local government's change to healthier pest management practices can begin with the concerns of just a few people. Here are some steps you can follow to reduce pesticide pollution in your community.

Research the problem. Through the parks or public works department, learn about your local government's pesticides policy and decisions structure. Also, try to find out what pest problems are common in your community, which pesticides are being used, and their health effects.



Build community support. Develop a core group of supporters to launch your campaign; a group will be more effective than one individual. Talk it over with friends, neighbors, and community organizations, as well as local groups interested in children's health and wildlife issues.



Define your platform. Before you approach your local public agencies, figure out exactly what it is you want them to do. Based on their current pest management practices and the threats they pose, your requests might sound like this:

- Phase out the most toxic pesticides.
- Use pesticides only for documented pest problems and never just for aesthetic purposes.
- Use proven alternatives to pesticides and reduce overall pesticide use.
- Identify some parks to be 100% pesticide-free.
- Notify the public by posting signs in advance of any pesticide application on public land, and leave the signs in place for at least one week after.

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The growing concern for salmon recovery has further prompted cities and counties to reduce pesticides. We in the Northwest honor the salmon as a part of our identity, culture and environmental heritage, and yet twenty-six salmon runs are now listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. Lab research shows that some pesticides might kill salmon directly, although this is not confirmed by field research; it is still more likely that one or more pesticides affects some salmon's sense of smell, which could diminish their "homing" ability, predator avoidance, or breeding success. Pesticides also affect the availability of some prey for salmon.

Encourage Habitat Restoration and Native Landscaping

Habitat restoration projects and native plant landscaping at city parks, libraries, and businesses are a growing, positive trend in communities around Puget Sound. One by one and especially collectively, such projects help restore the healthy ecology of our urban areas.

Restoring pieces and parts of our natural environment can begin or speed up the recovery of a whole ecosystem. Often, citizens can find outside funding to pay for the important work of reviving the habitat and ecological functions of a special place, such as a neighborhood park or creek. Such grants often pay for plants, restoration tools, and signs. Grants for large projects may provide money to hire staff, such as a landscape architect or volunteer coordinator.

What you can do (continued):

Advance your agenda. Meet with city staff and decision makers to introduce your platform. Do your best to win over staff responsible for pest management early in the policy-design process, if you can; this increases your chance of success. Support your case by citing concrete examples of successes with such policies in other jurisdictions.



Find a champion among the decision makers. Next, meet with decision makers (usually city council members), focusing first on individuals who are likely to support you, as they can then help influence other council members. (You may find the key decision maker in local departments such as Public Works or Parks and Recreation.)



Develop and implement a plan for your campaign. Consider the following elements: creating your message and having it understood; lobbying the decision makers; attracting media coverage; reaching out to the whole community;

and building coalitions. (*The Activist Toolkit has more information on all aspects of a grassroots campaign. See the Resources section*)



Take your proposal to the city or county council. Your goal is to get your local government to adopt a healthy community pest-management policy. By this time you should know you have the votes to pass it, have speakers ready to testify at the public comment hearing, and have citizens ready to pack the room.



Inform the public of the outcome. Whether the council passes or rejects your plan, use your local media to let the public know about your campaign, and to influence your targets.



Keep an eye on follow-through. A healthy pest management policy works only if the city or county really follows it. Maintain good relationships with city staff. Anticipate future efforts to weaken the policy. Ongoing vigilance and public support are essential.

New public buildings, public landscape projects, and vegetation management in city parks give citizens splendid opportunities to incorporate native plants for a more wildlife-friendly landscape. Parks and public buildings often have their landscaping contracted out to professional architects, who may not have the interests of wildlife in mind. Typical commercial landscaping consists of a few exotic “industrial horticulture species,” and often requires heavy watering, chemical pesticides and fertilizers. This cookie-cutter approach to landscaping too frequently demands high maintenance and rarely supports much wildlife. In Seattle, citizens successfully lobbied the parks department to incorporate native plants as much as possible into their vegetation plan for Magnuson Park. In Shoreline, after a citizen diligently worked with decision makers, the county used native plants to landscape a new library.



What You Can Do:

Volunteer for a habitat restoration project in your community. Community calendars in local newsletters and weeklies are full of them. Contact the project coordinator to confirm the work party. Ask how strenuous the tasks are, what clothes you should wear, and what to bring with you.



Start your own habitat restoration project to restore a creek, wetland, or park in your neighborhood. King County’s Wild Places for City Spaces program offers grants for urban restoration projects. Recipients may include organizations, community groups and government agencies. Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods also makes grants for similar projects. *For information on these and other habitat restoration funding programs, see the Resources section.*



Persuade public landscape projects to go native. Contact your parks or public works departments, school district, or local

library system to find out if they have a policy about planting natives in new landscaping projects. Learn what projects are coming up that you might be able to influence. Volunteer to work with the architect in providing a list of native plants to consider. Contact Seattle Audubon or the Washington Native Plant Society for advice and help.



Teach your neighbors. Coordinate a Gardening for Life Workshop for your neighborhood group or host a natural landscaping party. Contact Seattle Audubon for a guest speaker. *See the Resources section.*



Publicize your successes! Inspire others with tales of your success and leverage your early victories to build an increasingly stronger platform. You’ve earned some praise!