



## List of pesticide-free towns growing Health concerns fuel the trend, but not everyone is convinced

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When spring arrives, Pleasant Valley Park in Bernards Township will be a green suburban oasis, with a playground and walking trails; baseball fields and picnic pavilion; acres of lawns and a fish-stocked pond.

This year, township officials said, the goal is to keep the park and others in Bernards green without chemical pesticides or fertilizers.

Bernards Township last week joined a growing list of New Jersey towns to announce it is going "pesticide-free," by eliminating the use of chemical pesticides in parks and using them minimally on other township land.

Part of a statewide effort spearheaded by the New Jersey Environmental Federation, the change is intended to reduce pesticides' impact on the environment and the public.

"We feel that from a health standpoint, it would be better off for our residents," said Bernards Mayor Carolyn Kelly. The township in December adopted an "integrated pest management" policy that calls for things like manual weeding; aerating soil; and letting grass grow taller as a way to maintain grounds.

The change was formally announced last month at Pleasant Valley Park, where a "pesticide-free zone" sign was installed.

"We should take the lead by showing private homeowners that a town can do away with chemicals on the lawn and still have beautiful parks and recreation areas," Kelly said.

The New Jersey Environmental Federation several years ago began encouraging local governments to stop the use of chemical pesticides, which include herbicides, insecticides, fungicides and rodenticides. Some 26 towns from Clifton to Raritan Township have done so, along with two counties and one school district, according to Jane Nogaki, pesticide program coordinator for the federation.

The idea is to "reduce toxic exposure to public health and our waterways," said Nogaki, who said that about 4 million pounds of pesticides are applied each year in New Jersey, about half of that for lawn care by homeowners, commercial applicators and others. The chemicals break down and cause increased risk of cancer, asthma, learning disabilities and other ailments, especially in children, she said.

Pesticide-free park maintenance may mean added costs. In Raritan Township, where Mine Brook Park and Morales Nature Park are to be maintained without pesticides, it will mean more weed-whacking.

"What you used to be able to spray, you could get away for two months. Now you have to weed-whack on at least a two-week basis to make things look presentable," said public works director Dirk Struening. "It's more man-hours."

Bernards budgeted an extra \$10,000 this year for the change. But public works director Pat Monaco said after they begin instituting more natural maintenance, costs should come down. "I think we can make it work," he said.

Not everyone believes pesticide-free zones are a good step. Karen Reardon is spokeswoman for RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), which represents manufacturers, formulators and distributors of non-agricultural pesticides and fertilizers. She said products available for use by towns are "tested and safe for use," and if used in a targeted way are "perfectly safe."

She raised the possibility of danger from not using pesticides -- the risk of bee stings to children, for example.

At Rutgers University's School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, pest management specialist George Hamilton said eliminating pesticides could be a problem. He offered the example of gypsy moths, that can defoliate and kill trees.

"If we can get away without using the pesticides, fine, but we do need to recognize there are circumstances where we need to use them, and I'd hate to see that curtailed," he said.

Different places have different policies. Burlington County calls for minimal use of pesticides, and pesticide-free zones within its county parks. Bernards is going pesticide-free in all of its parks, plus switching from synthetic to organic fertilizers. Raritan Township is eliminating pesticides in some parks but not in Lenape Park, where there are heavily used athletic fields.

Raritan Township Deputy Mayor John King said part of the change is getting used to the grass being a little longer.

"Before if there was a leaf on the street, we probably picked it up. Now we'll probably let the rural aspect come back," he said.

Even in towns with the broadest policies, there are exceptions. Bernards' Monaco said if beehives are found dangerously close to a playground, for example, workers will try to get rid of them without using chemicals. But if necessary they'll mark off the area and spray pesticide.

Much concern about pesticide use concerns children.

Joe Speeney, of Bernards Township, began worrying about pesticides after his now 2-year-old son, Dan, was born. Speeney said he and his wife asked their homeowners association to stop spraying pesticides, but got nowhere.

Speeney then went to township officials to ask for a pesticide-free policy there. He and his family were present when the change was announced.

"I feel fantastic," said Speeney, who is now on the Bernards environmental commission. "It's a great day for kids in this town."

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