

Pesticide use declining at local golf courses West Island links double as wildlife refuges

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Pesticide use at West Island golf courses is lower than it has ever been, but a local environmental group's spokesman said more could be done to curb use of the toxic chemicals that could be harmful to wildlife.

Pesticide use by golf courses is legal - they're the only exception to an island-wide pesticide ban, and veteran groundskeepers at two of the West Island's most venerable golf courses told the Chronicle that pesticides are much more dangerous in the hands of homeowners who don't know what they're doing than they are applied to small areas of a golf course by a trained professional.

"That's definitely the case," Beaconsfield Golf Course head groundskeeper Doug Meyer. "People have next to nothing to worry about in terms of pesticides used on the golf course. We spot treat areas, rather than do blanket treatment (of herbicides) like what went on 10 to 15 years ago. The fact is, 80 to 85 per cent of what we end up applying to the golf course are fungicides, and those are no more harmful than antibiotics that humans use to help them get over an illness," Meyer said.

The course — like Royal Montreal in Ile Bizard — is a certified Audobon Society wildlife refuge, and pesticides are diluted and applied by technicians who have followed the Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Meyer said. That's where problems for homeowners doing the same thing begins to arise, he said.

"Pesticides come in a liquid form that must be diluted and mixed properly, because this stuff gets into clothes and on your skin and is extremely toxic. Here, when it's mixed, the operator is using rubber gloves, is wearing synthetic rubber boots and applies it carefully. People who decide they want a nice clean lawn and drive to Ontario or whatever to buy the stuff illegally and then applies it improperly on a lawn can do a lot of damage," Meyer said. A 36-year veteran of horticulture and a former researcher at Guelph University, Meyer's been working with pesticides for the entire span.

"I'm healthy and pretty fit for a 57-year-old. I'd say I'm doing OK," he quipped.

At Royal Montreal, course and property manager Blake McMaster said he has eight technicians certified to spray pesticides on an area that makes up but a fraction of Royal Montreal's grounds.

"Out of 800 acres, we only spray pesticides on areas we know will have a high concentration of insects, when added up, total about the size of a small lawn," he said.

"We just try to avoid it altogether. Most years, we actually don't treat anything with pesticides, actually. It depends on the season, the weather, and how buggy it is in a given year," he said.

Royal Montreal's rare cases of spraying pesticides aren't harming the wildlife that make their homes on the golf course; McMaster said more than 50 species of birds have been spotted on the property, alongside the raccoons, foxes, deer and waterfowl that call Royal Montreal home.

Both courses have also made a move toward a more naturalized environment, letting flora that isn't directly in the playing area grow unencumbered

Green Coalition spokesman and Roxboro resident Dave Fletcher said although the effort courses such as Beaconsfield and Royal Montreal have made in creating vibrant, healthy green spaces that are conducive to both human recreation and animal life is admirable, there are still steps that can be taken.

"The Audobon model is good, but let's face it. Golf courses are not necessarily going to put the needs of the environment first and they could be made more wildlife-friendly," Fletcher said. I've been hearing how wildlife is being encouraged by some of the courses, and I think that needs to be encouraged, frankly," Fletcher said. "I've been criticized in the past for defending golf courses, but the fact is, the land is much better used for recreation and as a green space than it would be as a housing development," he said.