

Be wise with pesticides

If a little bit is good, then a whole lot more must be better, right? Wrong. This is faulty logic, at least when it applies to pesticides.

A pesticide is any chemical used to control or kill a pest. Examples include insecticides (designed to kill insects), fungicide (chemical designed to control fungi) and herbicides (designed to control weeds).

Pesticides can be good tools when used correctly. But the overuse and misuse of pesticides in our landscapes and gardens can result in a number of problems.

Certain pests can become resistant to insecticides when a product is repeatedly used. Because many insect species reproduce rapidly, having many generations per year, a resistant population can develop in a short time. Hundreds of insect species are known to have resistance to certain insecticides.

Pesticide overuse can make some pest problems worse. For example, the insecticide Sevin will kill many insects but will have little or no effect on aphids or spider mites. And repeated use of Sevin will eliminate many beneficial insects that feed on these pests. So you may end up with much larger populations of aphids and spider mites than if you applied no insecticide at all.

Indiscriminate use of broad-spectrum pesticides kills many insects, good and bad. Not all insects need to be killed. Less than one percent of all insects in Florida are damaging to plants and many are beneficial. These beneficial insects are the “good guys” of the insect world. They feed on harmful insects and, as a result, keep their numbers in check. Once you’ve made the mistake of killing off the good guys, such as lady beetles, you may have to increase the use of insecticides because the good guys are no longer there to help reduce the harmful insects. Conversely, if you eliminate all of the bad insects, the beneficial insects will not have anything to eat. Spraying every six-legged creature that exists is not a good idea. The overuse of pesticides can throw off the delicate, beneficial balance in nature.

Learn to tolerate a few pests and a little damage. Attempting to maintain a pest-free lawn, landscape or garden is impractical, a waste of money and time and may be detrimental to our environment.

Pesticides are not always the best choice when dealing with pests. There are many other options such as choosing pest resistant plants, avoiding excess fertilization and watering, eliminating a plant that has to be frequently sprayed, eliminating small pest populations by hand, etc.

While pesticides remain part of our pest control arsenal, care should be taken to use them wisely and correctly.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, June 4, 2009