



THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Hiring Home Construction Help

So you're hiring a contractor or other builder to do some work on your house. How do you make sure that he or she doesn't bring toxic materials into your home sweet home?

1) Find your person. One easy remedy would be to just find someone who specializes in using less-toxic materials. You might look for them in the green and natural building domains, though don't assume that everyone there has these abilities.

Unfortunately, however, I haven't seen many such folks promoting their toxics avoidance skills. Plus we have so many other vital criteria to weigh in our choice, including skill set, competency, schedule, aesthetic sense, working style, cost, etc.

Therefore, you might just want to ask your otherwise-qualified candidates if they have experience choosing less-toxic materials, consider that important, and will cheerfully work with you to meet that criteria. If they respond with resistance or demeaning statements about such concerns, they're probably not a good match.

2) Make a plan. Once you've chosen your helper, discuss how they'll meet your less-toxic goals. For instance, you might have a written agreement that

they won't use any product with the key word Danger or Warning without first getting your

approval — and will ask for it with enough time for you to investigate and possibly propose an option.

This casual approach will probably catch the worst offenders. However, be aware that not all products have this type of label, and those key words reflect only acute (immediate) health risk, not chronic (ongoing).

So, if you want to be more thorough, you could ask them to write out all their planned materials before use, including cleanup products. Ask them to look for less-toxic options, and be sure to get exact product names. You could do this in batches before each stage of the project, or at the start for the whole project.

Then research the proposed products according to your criteria, and either give your OK or offer options. Remember, lower toxicity is more important with indoor products. (For help evaluating, see www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol14no6.pdf.)

Also, if you do suggest an alternative product, ask if they can produce quality results with it, which professionals should be able to do. You don't want them later blaming their bad outcomes on your product.

Although planning products ahead does take time and effort, it can help you avoid toxic surprises while letting the contractor "run with the ball," without checking each decision with you. Plus, when misunderstandings are avoided, everyone wins!

Debra Lynn Dadd (in her handy reference book, *Home Safe Home*) suggests that you can also protect your home-as-job-site by not allowing

See *Hiring Help*, over

STEP Updates

■ **Thanks to everyone who sent in your yellow STEP Feedback cards.** Your comments really do help us serve your needs. As usual, we'll report the survey results in the next issue.

■ **If you can't find your card, you can get a substitute** at www.healthyworld.org/STEPSurvey.html. If you're a Sebastopol resident, please write that on the printout, plus your name and address.

■ **Thank you also to this year's fabulous and much-appreciated STEP Stuffers.** Twice a year (in December and January), we invite folks to help us stuff the yellow Feedback cards into the water bills. These have actually turned into fun little social events, as we playfully gab together while feeling happily productive in community service.

This year's STEP Stuffers were Judy Wismer*, Marilyn Madrone*, Michaela Miller*, Glenna Elliott, Renee Kramer, Holly Oswald, Chris Layton, and Colin Ramsey. (Folks with an "*" are *Super* STEP stuffers, because they helped at both sessions.) As usual, people lingered afterwards to keep chatting. Now that's a good sign!

If you want to be invited to play with us next year, just sign up at www.healthyworld.org/EList and check the STEP stuffings option.

Hello Patricia —

I just saw the STEP newsletter with your piece on dryer sheets and I wanted to thank you for raising the issue and giving such great alternatives to people.

That's what I love about the newsletter. It's not all "Hey you! Don't do this!" It's a very balanced approach and based in educating and informing people. Not preachy.

I hope the mention in the newsletter is a start to raising awareness in Sebastopol about the dangers of this product.

— Marcy Gordon



Controlling Crabgrass

If your yard has unwanted crabgrass, now's a good time to act (from April through June), because prevention really is the easiest cure.

That's the advice of Paul Tukey, author of *The Organic Lawn Care Manual* and founder of *SafeLawns.org*, an education nonprofit. He says that it's less useful to try to kill crabgrass in August, because it's an annual and dies with the frost. What's key, he explains, is discouraging the seeds earlier in the year. To do this, mow your grass once it's over three inches tall, and skip the raking. (Rake in the fall.) This keeps crabgrass seeds from getting the light they need to germinate. Also bag your clippings and put them deep in the woods (or in your green can).

Another key strategy, say the *LawnCare.org* experts, is to keep your lawn healthy (for instance by adding a thin layer of compost), because crabgrass opportunistically enters areas of weakness. They advise against using herbicides, as they're nonselective and also harm lawn grass. For more on healthy lawn care, see www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol4no3.pdf.

You can also pull crabgrass, to keep it at bay. Or remove all growth in an area, to re-seed later, by sheet mulching with cardboard (see www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol3no2.pdf). Or spread corn gluten meal as a pre-emergent. Timing on that is crucial; do the first round in late April or early May. Learn more at www.thriftyfun.com/Getting-Rid-of-Crabgrass-1.html.

Oh, and not everyone dislikes crabgrass. Yes, it can threaten the American-ideal lawn by outcompeting and looking different than common lawn grasses. But some folks like a yard with diverse plants. Plus crabgrass is grown in other regions as a nutritious and highly-productive staple grain and forage that flourishes even in difficult soils.

SOURCES: www.awaytogarden.com/organic-lawncare-with-paul-tukey-crabgrass-control-reducing-compaction-and-more • www.lawncare.org/crabgrass-prevention • www.eattheweeds.com/crabgrass-digitaria-sanguinalis-2

Another Reason to Remove Your Shoes

In *TNS XIV/2*, we discussed the evidence that toxics come into our homes via our shoes — and that we can largely prevent this by removing shoes at the door and using inner and outer doormats. This also helps keep our houses cleaner overall, lightening our housework loads.

I recently discovered another reason to remove your shoes. In a study by Dr. Charles Gerba, a University of Arizona microbiologist and professor, participants were given brand new shoes to wear for two weeks. Then the shoes were tested for bacteria — and nearly all (96%) had coliform and *E. coli* bacteria on them! Gerba thinks the source is likely public restroom floors and animal fecal material outdoors.

Other bacteria were detected, including *Klebsiella pneumonia* (which can cause pneumonia as well as wound and bloodstream infections), and *Serratia ficaria* (which can lead to respiratory tract infection).

Gerba also found that bacteria can be tracked deep into our homes, and transfer to tile and carpet. From there, it can easily be touched by children, pets, and anyone else on the floor — then transported to hands, mouths, clothes, furniture, counter tops, beds, cribs, etc.

Now some people, concerned about having such potentially harmful germs in the safe zone of their homes, might consider using various toxic products. However, identifying this key entry point offers us a much easier and elegant less-toxic solution: keep your shoes, and those materials, out at the start. You can also periodically wash your shoes; the study found that this eliminated over 90% of germs there.

You can also make it easier for guests to shed their shoes by offering them house slippers or socks, and provide shoe covers to workers. (See more about the problem and solutions at www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol14no2.pdf.)

SOURCE: "Shoes Transmit Disease, Leave Them by the Door," June 17, 2008, www.ecochildsplay.com/2008/06/17/shoes-transmit-disease-leave-them-by-the-door

Quick Steps

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day is Tuesday March 31**, from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, or ask about other dates or locations, call (707) 795-2025 or (877) 747-1870 at least 24 hours beforehand. You can also drop items at the Household Toxics Facility. Get more disposal specifics at www.recyclenow.org.

■ **You can get email delivery of the TNS newsletter.** Folks in or out of City limits can sign up at www.healthyworld.org/EList.

■ **The STEP Online Index makes it easy for you** to quickly discover what's toxic and the effective alternatives. See www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html.

■ **STEP articles are available for reprint or adaptation in your periodical.** Contact me (the editor) for more information!

Hiring Help, continued

pesticides, noxious cleaners, smoking (as it can penetrate walls), or gas-powered generators inside (as exhaust can penetrate building materials and gas can spill).

You can get more on this topic via the STEP Online index under Green Building. Also, I'd love to do more articles on less-toxic remodeling. If you have any expertise or questions on this, please let me know!

~ Patricia Dines

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html

Printed on recycled paper.