

THE NEXT STEP

Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



Sharing Toxics Information Effectively

A reader recently asked my advice about how to improve an email she'd sent to a community list about a toxics issue. (She'd received a negative response after sending it.)

I get questions like this periodically, and am delighted that people want to help spread the word about everyday toxics and the effective (and often cheaper) less-toxic alternatives. So, of course, I want to help with that process.

I also know that it can sometimes be challenging to talk with people about toxics, as folks can have strong feelings, incorrect beliefs, and defensive responses.

So I'd thought I'd share some suggestions for effective sharing, gleaned over my years of experimentation.

Tips for effective toxics emails

1) Write down your goal. What do you want as an outcome of your writing? Then use that to make a helpful headline and introduction. People are busy and only read briefly before moving on to the next email.



So — are you just sharing information? Asking a question? Or do you want the recipient to take an action? Say at the start which category this is, so readers know how to “listen” to the communication. Also, if you want them to act, make the action clear with the needed specifics.

2) Consider your audience and their everyday values, needs, and goals. You have no authority over your readers, and most people are concerned first about their immediate circumstances. Entice them by being of service to their objectives.

So — are they young or old? Rich or poor? Parents or retirees? What do they spend their days doing? What do they worry about? Why should they care about this?

3) With your readers' needs in mind, frame your writing as an invitation, an opportunity, that helps them with their needs.

For instance, you might talk about how your information will help them protect their health, children, pets, property, legacy, etc. Maybe mention how it'll save them time and money, connect them with allies, or make their lives easier. Or perhaps it'll help them make a difference on an important issue that matters to them.

4) Speak to people with care and respect, and avoid using triggering language, which can make people feel defensive and stop listening. Don't speak down to folks. Avoid insulting whole groups of people, because that can feel unfair — and your reader might be in that group! If you want them to stop using an everyday household prod-

uct, don't call it nasty or hazardous waste; they can hear that as insulting to them personally.

I use phrases like “everyday hidden toxics” to make it clear that the person bought a common product that they might not know is toxic. Thus I'm giving them new information, not insulting their actions.

Also, avoid speaking too much about problems without solutions. This can frustrate and turn people away.

5) Check that your facts are right. That helps keep your communication useful and the responses constructive.

6) If someone replies to your writing in a defensive way, seek first to respect the person, their feelings, and your relationship. Put aside the topic, and prioritize calming down the dynamic. Listen for their feelings and needs, and speak to those. Look for something you can agree with or care about. People generally need to feel respected before they can listen.

So you might say, “Hi (name) - Thank you for letting me know your concerns. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I was just seeking to be helpful about (shared concern X). I'm glad to talk with you more about this, if you want. Sincerely, (name).”

7) If someone answers with senseless personal attacks on you, and shows no interest in the facts or being fair, decide if you need to respond. If you do respond, but don't want to engage, keep it very simple and don't try to change their mind or give them something to debate. So you might say, “Hi (name), Thank you for letting me know your concerns. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I guess we just see this topic differently. Best regards, (name).”

I hope these thoughts are useful to you. Of course, the topic of persuasion is vast. So please feel free to share with me what works for you!

You can also find more suggestions in my articles, “Being Persuasive” (www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol16no1.pdf) and “Eco-Persuasion” (www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl5g.html).

~ Patricia Dines

Healthier Houseplants

I love hearing reader questions — especially when they give me new article ideas! That happened for me earlier this year when someone in our latest STEP survey asked for information about nontoxic treatments for indoor plant pests. I hadn't covered that before!

And the topic is timely now. As we start moving our lives back inside for the winter, it can lovely to bring green companions with us!

So here are my suggestions for nurturing healthy houseplants.

1) Healthy plants start with smart purchases. Before bringing a houseplant into your home, look at its care needs and be realistic. Do you have the conditions it needs? And don't get a high-care plant if you have a too-hectic lifestyle. Plus, if you have children or dogs, skip those that are toxic to eat. Just in case they decide to take a nibble!

2) Water your plants appropriately. Overly dry or damp soil can make plants more vulnerable to pests and disease.

3) If you have an ailing plant, check for pests. Act as soon as possible, while it's easier to save the plant.

To help identify a pest issue, browse pictures of common ones (including aphids, leafminers, whiteflies, and mites) at www.planetnatural.com/pest-problem-solver/house-plant-pests.

Once you know the pest, I prefer the suggested remedies at www.savvygardening.com/natural-pest-control-for-houseplants.

4) Often a good first remedy is to give your plant a thorough watering and washing. You can bring it outside. Or (if the container is water-safe), put it in your kitchen sink or shower, with a plastic bag around the bottom to keep the soil inside. Water the plant, then blast the leaves over and under. If the

soil is very dry, wait and water it a few more times, so the soil becomes saturated and better at holding water again. Let it sit to drain, then dry the pot and put it back in place.

5) For more serious cases, use a nontoxic or least-toxic product, per the suggestions at the links in Step 3. Remember: Always read and follow label directions!

6) If you regularly have problems, consider getting plants that are resistant to pests. This link offers options, with descriptions and pictures. It also gives advice for growing them, plus warnings about those that are toxic for children or pets to eat. One of my favorite suggestions is growing culinary herbs — because they are safe, pretty — and make dinner more tasty too! www.goodearthplants.com/dont-bug-house-plants-resist-pests

For more information and options, you can call or visit our local Harmony Farm & Garden Supply, which offers various less-toxic options.

But Wait, There's More!

■ **Proper paint disposal.** In our annual survey, a reader asked how to dispose of unwanted paint. Well, we actually have the key options written out for you in our article, "Discarding Paint Safely." Just go to the STEP Index (see box), scroll to the **Paints & Stains** line, and choose (STEP issue) XVII/5. That article also describes how you can get other

people's discarded paint free for your projects. That saves you money and completes the reuse loop!

■ **Non-toxic rat deflection.** Two readers in our annual survey asked how to prevent rat incursions without using toxic pesticides. Folks can find key steps for addressing rodents outlined in our article, "Mouse Ousters." The key difference with rats is that it's advised not to "catch and release" them. To read this article, go to the STEP Index (see box), scroll to the **Rodents** line, and choose (STEP issue) VII/3. For added information, click on (STEP issue) IX/6.

■ **Recycling cloth.** One reader asked for more recycling information, especially for fibers. While we usually don't cover general recycling, I expect others have the same question. And I do like keeping things out of the landfill! So, as a bonus (shhhh), I will say that you can drop *usable clothes* at thrift stores; *usable cloth and craft supplies* at Legacy in Sebastopol; and *damaged cloth and clothing* at Goodwill. Goodwill bundles unusable material to go into

the fiber reuse market. I place mine in a separate bag marked "Fiber," to make their sorting process easier.

■ **Discarding toxics safely.** Remember: Keep toxics out of the trash! The Sonoma County Waste Management Agency offers three ways to discard toxics: The Household Toxics Facility at the dump; Community Toxics Collection days; and the Toxics Rover Pick up Service. For more, see www.recyclenow.org or call 707/565-3375.

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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**Got a pest problem?
Or a toxics question?**

The STEP Online Index can help! It makes it easy to look up past newsletter issues by topic. There you'll find our well-researched, condensed, and useful information — to help you get up-to-speed and into action. It also makes it easy to share this information!

www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html