

Silent Spring, by Rachel Carson, opened the eyes of the world to the dangers of chemical sprays. The book came out fifty years ago, in 1962, when chlordane, DDT, and Aldrin were commonly used. Case studies of the widespread poisoning of humans and wildlife reported in her essays led to the ban of these chlorin-ated hydrocarbons. The ban is actually only on domestic use; chemical companies in the U.S. still produce DDT for use in other countries.

A second group of insecticides are the organic phosphates, which includes parathion and malathion. A third group Carson discusses is the herbicides, possibly the most deadly of all. The widespread and indiscriminate use of chemi-cals had already permanently changed the earth. There is not a mother on the planet whose milk does not contain DDT.

In clear terms, Carson explains the direct connection between chemical use and the rise in cancer rates. The insecticides and herbicides routinely used in our country cause the cells in our body to malfunction. When one looks at how spray-crazy we are, one is not surprised to hear when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer. It has been known for fifty years that exposure to these chemicals mutates cells and causes cancer. The sadness is still present, yet the causes are unmistakable.

Toxic chemicals concentrate in the food chain. For example, run-off into streams will kill some fish, but only make others sick. Bigger fish eat the smaller fish, and in turn humans eat the bigger fish, thereby passing the toxins on into our bodies. Many poisoned earthworms become food for birds, which then can-not reproduce or may simply die. Another way we get chemicals in us is via roadside spraying and drift.

No other book raised environmental awareness as much as Silent Spring did. Although highly scientific, it is easy to read and comprehend. Within a decade of its release, we had Earth Day, the EPA, the Clean Water Act, and a small organic farming movement.

As part of the latter, I have been well aware of these dangers. Although I do not use them, I am often exposed to deadly poisons. Driving down the road, one will occasionally get a whiff of herbicide. Know that at this one whiff, cells in the body have been immediately changed and the risk of cancer has increased.

Time and time again, the efforts to eradicate weeds and pests chemically have failed. Carson offers many alternatives that work much better, such as using less toxic sprays made from plants, or introducing natural predators or sterilized males. If our county needed jobs, we would not spray, but mow. I have found that improving soil quality deters pests, therefore I hire people to hoe weeds rather than use a spray. Reading Silent Spring again reinforced my organic inclinations.