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The Olympian, Olympia Washington

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Cutting back on chemicals  
East Bay neighbors complete yearlong journey to become pesticide-free

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George and Karen Bray removed nearly all of their lawn and replaced it with a variety of drought-tolerant plants as part of Thurston County's pesticide-free program.



Tony Overman/The Olympian

George and Karen Bray replaced their lawn with a variety of drought-resistant plants at their home along Budd Inlet.



Tony Overman/The Olympian

Fred and Mary Jane Adair cleared their front walk of noxious English ivy and replaced it with less-invasive Boston and Virginia Creeper ivies. Above the walkway hangs an easy-to-manage evergreen clematis.

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Tony Overman/The Olympian

The Brays landscaped their walkways with Oregon hazelnut shells, which are more sturdy than bark chips.



Tony Overman/The Olympian

Part of the Brays' strategy was to replace their aggressive English ivy with a noninvasive Virginia Creeper (pictured).



Tony Overman/The Olympian



Tony Overman/The Olympian

Part of the Brays' strategy was to replace their aggressive English ivy (pictured) with a noninvasive Virginia Creeper.



Tony Overman/The Olympian

#### [SARAH JACKSON](#) THE OLYMPIAN

Lawn, garden and pest-control chemicals include some of the most hazardous products in homes.

Though it's obvious some products aren't exactly environmentally friendly, it's easy to think a few squirts of hard-core weedkiller or a little bit of poisonous slug bait won't hurt.

It's easy, especially when what you're using is practically guaranteed to work.

That's what's difficult about going completely organic, or pesticide-free, all at once in your yard, especially if you've gardened one way for decades: You might have to learn a whole new set of products and gardening methods.

#### **Learn more**

- "**Grow Smart, Grow Safe,**" a King County consumer guide to lawn and garden products now in its fourth edition, is available from Thurston County. Call Jennifer Johnson at 360-754-4111, ext. 7631, for a copy or for more information on the Common Sense Gardening program. You can also order numerous free publications online at [www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehrp/gardening.html](http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehrp/gardening.html). Click on the "Publications" link.

But that's what 13 families living along East Bay Drive did to reduce their contribution to contaminants found in Budd Inlet, which provides their homes with such wonderful waterfront appeal.

They took part in the county's Pesticide-Free Model Neighborhood Project, a pilot program that started in January and concludes this month with a party for the volunteer participants.

Gardeners in the program signed a pledge to garden without the use of pesticides for one year.

Then, during a series of monthly meetings, they learned how to use the least-toxic methods for all of their gardening and pest-control needs.

"It's not about never using pesticides," said Jennifer Johnson, an environmental educator with Thurston County Public Health, who ran the program.

Gardeners in the program learned that products aren't simply good or bad. Instead, there's a continuum of options, ranging from terribly toxic (especially harmful to wildlife, pets and humans) to least toxic (maybe not perfect, but less harmful).

Each family of gardeners also met with an arborist who evaluated each yard on its earth- and bay-friendly merits and offered suggestions for better plant choices and less-toxic products.

Monthly meetings included experts on everything from landscaping with native plants to efficient watering methods.

It's been an eye-opening experience for many of the gardeners.

During the program, more than 100 pounds of pesticides were collected from the homes and exchanged for more environmentally friendly products.

\*\*\*\*

Longtime gardeners such as Fred and Mary Jane Adair -- who stopped using most harmful chemicals before the program -- were inspired to make their homes even more pesticide-free.

The Adairs, for example, decided to investigate the chemicals used by the company that sprays for carpenter ants every year around their home.

They soon learned the chemicals were, in fact, harmful to shellfish and juvenile fish, not a good thing for a household on the bay.

"It's involvement in this program that made us say, 'What materials are they using?' " Fred said.

But the Adairs didn't have to sever their relationship with the company.

Instead, they decided to hire the company to inspect their property every year for ants. If

- **"Pesticide Free Yard" signs** will be available next month through Thurston County. Call Jennifer Johnson at 360-754-4111, ext. 7631, to sign a pledge.

- **Online:** [Click here](#) for a gallery of pictures of the now-pesticide-free Bray and Adair gardens.

carpenter ants show up, the Adairs will likely use Borax detergent.

It's not a perfect solution, but it's better than the previous method. Meanwhile, the Adairs also will ask the service to spray annually in a particularly vulnerable crawl space inside the house, which likely won't affect the groundwater.

It's a small step, but the Adairs are happy about decreasing their share of needless chemicals in the environment.

The Adairs, and other gardeners in the program, also made great strides to remove large amounts of invasive English ivy from their property.

The Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board has declared four cultivars of aggressive English ivy noxious weeds because they hinder native plants.

The Adairs' waterfront bank used to be primarily ivy.

"Ivy has an involved root system, but it's shallow," Fred Adair said, adding that it's not the best bank stabilizer since its roots go only 6 inches deep.

Since joining the program, Fred and Mary Jane have replaced some of their ivy with thimbleberry, Oregon grape and deciduous varieties of more polite ivies.

Right now, Mary Jane is enjoying the fall color that has come with the new ivies they planted on the ledge in front of their home.

"There are three different kinds here, and they change at different times, too," she said. "They will be just brilliant red."

The Adairs will continue to work on the ivy, but there is much work to do.

They're already enjoying surprising new growth from other plants that can only come in when English ivy is no longer the garden bully.

\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Ted and Sissie Klueh, who live a few houses down from the Adairs, are adjusting to more major changes.

"They came around one day and looked at all our things that we had been using and took them away, right under our noses," Sissie said of a time earlier in the program when households made the official conversion to pesticide-free. "They kind of cleaned us out."

Though it wasn't easy to give up the tried-and-true products, the Kluehs fell quickly into the arms of the program, which provided a wide variety of alternatives and products -- for free.

They received more earth-friendly slug bait (Sluggo), as well as copper strips to deter the slimy beasts.

They received a mulching lawn mower, which they were able to borrow for the summer in order to see its effects.

They received a flame weeder that Ted uses to zap weeds along the pavement and driveway.

"I'm still using it," Ted said. "You just burn it, so there's no weed."

Ted said alternative weed-killer products have been just as effective, too.

"One of them is kind of a derivative of corn," Ted said, reading the packaging. "It's called Concern Weed Preventer Plus. It's 100 percent natural corn gluten, a pre-emergent herbicide."

Ted said it has worked to deter dandelions and crab grass from areas around roses, flowers, bulbs, vegetables, trees and lawn.

"I put it all around the new stuff I planted," he said. "We're going to keep using it. We're going to use everything they gave us, and we're buying it on our own now."

The Kluhs also removed some of their lawn in favor of drought-tolerant perennials.

George and Karen Bray, who live down the street, did the same thing on a much larger scale.

They relandscaped their entire back yard with drought-tolerant shrubs, grasses and perennials, surrounded by hazelnut shells instead of bark chips or grass.

\*\*\*\*

Fred Adair is pleased with what he and Mary Jane have learned through the program, especially since he can refer back to a three-ring binder of resources he gleaned from the program, which covers everything from how to fight crane flies to product safety ratings in King County's "Grow Smart, Grow Safe" consumer guide to the environmental ramifications of just about every product on the market.

The Adairs can also refer back to the arborist's suggestions for their garden, which includes a list of plants perfect for their place.

"This is a recipe and a guideline to preserve the things we learned," he said. "Now I have a notebook -- that's indexed -- that I can reference."

Johnson said the Thurston County program -- funded by a one-time grant -- will continue next year with the city of Olympia, which will target neighborhoods near wells that directly affect the city's drinking-water quality.

For now, gardeners in the area can request pesticide-free information from Thurston County and create earth-friendly gardens on their own by signing a pledge to convert to least-toxic methods.

Those who do will have access to signs that say "Pesticide Free Yard."

The Kluhs hope similar programs will continue in South Sound.

"I'd recommend it to everybody. All the people are very enthusiastic," Ted Klueh said. "I didn't want all this toxic stuff going into the salt water here. It's just another way to clean

up the water."

*Sarah Jackson writes for The Olympian and can be reached at 360-704-6871 or [sajackso@olympia.gannett.com](mailto:sajackso@olympia.gannett.com).*

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