

Pesticide Safety Starts With Common Sense

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I had just graduated from Rutgers University, and had started working in the research fields of the University of Illinois prior to beginning my Master's research. One day, the farm supervisor (who thought all college kids were dumber than dirt), gave me a cough medicine bottle with some yellowish liquid in it. He told me that this was Roundup. He told me to put 1 ounce per gallon of water into a small sprayer, and "go out and spray by the horseradish." Then he left.

Now, during my time at Rutgers, I had taken many classes on plant diseases, insects, weeds, and so on. Each professor threw lots of chemical names at me, and I memorized them long enough to pass the next test. I had heard of the chemical Roundup (which had only recently been brought to market), but I could not remember what it killed. I thought it was an insecticide (as in, "round up all the bugs and kill them").

So, I mixed up the chemical as I'd been told, and went out to what I later found out was the world's largest horseradish breeding plot. (I also found out later that my graduate advisor was a nut for horseradish; he considered it a side-dish at dinner, and even put horseradish roots in a vase as a centerpiece during holidays.) And I went out there to cover these plants with what I THOUGHT was an insecticide.

Fortunately, I couldn't get the sprayer to work properly. One of the farm assistants showed me how to use it, and sent me off, warning me to be sure "not to hit any of the horseradish with the Roundup." I told him that I thought this was a strange way to kill insects. He then explained to me that Roundup is an herbicide, and kills everything green it lands on!

I've never been so glad to have an equipment malfunction! Killing that horseradish would have led to the shortest graduate student career ever!

Here are some of the key things I learned from this event:

1. Always store pesticides in their original containers with the label intact. If the chemical must be transferred to a different container for an emergency (leaks, etc.), then a complete label must be attached to it.

2. Always read the full label before buying, using, and disposing of any pesticide. If the label is unreadable, download a copy from the internet (which didn't exist back then).
3. If you have no idea what the product is or what it controls, DON'T USE IT! It's too easy to kill the plants you're trying to save.
4. If you don't know what you're doing, admit it. As the bumper sticker says, "There's no such thing as a silly question; only silly mistakes for not asking the question in the first place."

This is your last chance to sign up for the fall Master Gardener class, where you'll hear more stories of stupid mistakes I've made along the way. Contact the Purdue Extension Office at (812) 435-5287 to sign up.