

Housekeeping the Outdoors

It is so much easier indoors, housekeeping that is. Outdoors, removing mildew from porch railing is a chore. (Don't mix bleach and ammonia and create a toxic gas.) If you are working alone, stay off ladders. I know some of them have side braces, like bicycles with training wheels, but do be skeptical.

A weak bleach solution is good for cleaning birdbaths, a job that should be done frequently as a birdbath can harbor waterborne pathogens from dogs and cats and other animals both domestic and wild. Speaking of dogs and cats, outdoor pets demand continual hygiene oversight.

I remember a time decades ago when we would pour a little sevin into an old sock and gently bounce it on the dogs' hindquarters where the flea collars were not effective. Sevin was considered safe then and the dogs died of unremarkable old age. Today there are better ways: in fact you can check out the Humane Society of the US website, humanesociety.org for natural pet care.

Some of these suggestions you have tried if you have pets. 'Washing' the dog in tomato juice after an encounter with a skunk is one, but I've read rubbing them with hay will deodorize them. From what I remember about that persistent odor, it would take a whole haystack. A few baths even after tomato juice are advisable.

To ward off ticks, add crushed garlic to their food. Fleas and ticks are one of those 'can't have one without the other' things. You can use rope to make an effective dog flea collar by rubbing the rope with eucalyptus oil, tea oil, or citronella. Cats may lick the oils so a little brewer's yeast sprinkled on their food is a help for any skin problems they may have. A fussy cat does make a fussy child an omnivore by comparison so good luck with that.

Housekeeping covers a lot of territory and are not the strangest things environmental? So many of us in Gloucester-Mathews are familiar with the parameters of septic tanks and drain fields, that we have occasional discussions about them. In speaking of the fairly recent requirement that septic tanks be cleaned at five-year intervals to protect the ground water, the consensus, weighing the type of soil and so forth, was that we would prefer our close neighbors have clean tanks and effective drain fields.

Not so in Wisconsin where a law requiring a model system was overturned. The legislature recently asserted that raw sewerage floating on one property was one's own business unless it ran across the neighbor's yard. Doesn't that remind you of a three-year-old stamping his feet and shouting, "You can't tell me what to do" before being swept off to time out. Housekeeping on a wider scale can be what we do to protect the places we can't see from our kitchen window.

CIP, a term introduced to me in the October/November Horticulture magazine is short hand for contour infiltration planting. It is a partial and tremendously less expensive solution to the ruinous pollution of storm water runoff. The endeavor featured in the article took place in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the aged sewer system is inadequate to prevent sewerage escaping into the Ohio River. Fourteen billion gallons of untreated waste enter the Ohio yearly. We have read of a similar situation occurring in the James River when the Richmond sewer system is overwhelmed by heavy rains.

Cincinnati is in the process of installing planting strips, with a lot of help from both professionals and volunteers. These strips inhibit the flow of water by giving it a place to soak in, something parking lots and lawns are unable to do.

This same technique can be adapted by the home gardener who has a lawn that slopes toward the road and away. By using island plantings, slightly raised on the 'down' side, a lot of water will be prevented from escaping, slowly seeping into the ground for the benefit of both island and lawn. When I watch rain sweep down my steep driveway, I wish there were a way to direct the water into the flowerbeds. Because the gravel washed down as well, I had concrete put in. I remember those curbs that used to rise and sink between lanes to add and subtract lanes during rush hours and wonder if the same thing could be done cheaply with short barriers that could be manually flipped up and down. Do you think it would work?