

Pest control businesses becoming chem-free

Maine is a leader in the effort to discourage pesticide use in homes, schools and workplaces.

By JOHN RICHARDSON, Staff Writer

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ARUNDEL —When Ted St. Amand's father ran the family's pest extermination business, he typically showed up at jobs with a spray can full of pesticide.

"When you came in with a can, you meant business," St. Amand said.



Jill Brady/Staff Photographer

Ted St. Amand, owner of Atlantic Pest Solutions in Arundel, demonstrates how a CDC light trap is used to attract mosquitoes.



Jill Brady/Staff Photographer

Environmentally friendly products containing ingredients such as garlic juice, rosemary, mint and vanilla are all part of nonchemical pest control.

The pest control business has changed dramatically in the last decade, and St. Amand's company has shed the "man-with-a-can" image.

Atlantic Pest Solutions now is more likely to patch up holes in a home to keep mice and bats out, or install a special fan to keep flies out of a restaurant. Pesticide use is limited, and may even involve something like garlic juice or rosemary oil to repel mosquitoes.

Regulators and environmental advocates say the extermination industry as a whole still has a way to go to reduce its use of hazardous chemicals. St. Amand's company, however, is an example of how far some have come.

Maine also is considered a policy leader in the trend. The state has some of the most aggressive rules in the nation when it comes to discouraging pesticide use in homes, businesses and schools, according to a recent national study.

Large-scale agricultural use of pesticides has been scrutinized and regulated for 40 years. But the use of pesticides in homes and businesses has undergone a much more recent transition.

"A lot of people will go out of their way to buy organic food and then come home and spray the same chemical around their home," said Jonathan Kaplan, a senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national advocacy group. "Pesticide use (in homes and offices) remains a significant risk to public health and the environment."

That pesticide use increases the risk of a variety of cancers, and is contaminating waterways that are nowhere near farms, he said.

When St. Amand took over the business from his father in 1984, the standard industry approach was relatively straightforward. Kill the pests and, if more show up, come back and do it again.

"We didn't really solve the problems; we really kind of decimated a population," he said.

St. Amand gradually became a problem solver, an approach that works better over the long term, he said. He sees his job now as a kind of investigator who studies a pest problem and then creates a strategy to manage it, using chemicals as a last resort. It's an approach known in the business as Integrated Pest Management.

St. Amand's company now has a lab to identify various insects, such as 45 species of mosquitoes. Knowing what species he's dealing with can lead him to their breeding ground.

His first weapon of choice is often a trap or a glue board that catches pests, so he can figure out what he's up against and how best to attack it.

For example, a standard approach to bats in the attic these days is to drape netting over a home so that the bats can fly out but not get back in. Once the attic is clear, all potential entries are sealed.

And consider how St. Amand's company helped a restaurant with flies, a common problem for the industry. He installed a light that traps flies and an "air curtain," or blower, that keeps flies from entering through an open doorway.

He also had the owner move a trash bin away from the building and used a modern chemical pesticide in it to keep flies from breeding there.

Another big change in the business is the nature of the pesticides that are available, said Richard Stevenson Jr., technical director of Brunswick-based Modern Pest Services. Chemicals now have more targeted effects so they kill only the pests, and they are made to be less persistent in the environment, he said.

Stevenson's family-run company is the largest exterminator in Maine and considers itself a leader in the trend. "It's catching on, but not all companies are practicing yet," he said.

State policies are helping to fuel the change. A study released in July by Beyond Pesticides, a group that is working to reduce pesticide use, concluded that Maine is one of the most progressive states for promoting nonchemical pest control.

Maine was one of the first states, for example, to require schools, landlords and employers to avoid using pesticides when possible, and to notify those who may be exposed before applying the chemicals.

Some exterminators in Maine are not yet committed to the new approach, said Gary Fish, manager of pesticide programs for the Maine Board of Pesticides Control. "They're not spraying the same old-fashioned way, but they're not taking the time with the customers and not doing as thorough initial surveys."

"Depending on the commitment of the individual operator or company you can get to using pesticides pretty quickly," said Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides. "It still requires an educated consumer base. There are so many different definitions out there of Integrated Pest Management."

The Integrated Pest Management Institute of North America has introduced a program called Green Shield Certified, which uses a detailed audit to identify companies that use approved pesticides, and use them as a last resort. Seven companies nationwide have so far been Green Shield Certified, and one of them is Atlantic Green Pest Solutions, a new division of St. Amand's Arundel-based company.

St. Amand said demand for nonchemical pest control has grown steadily in recent years as consumers have learned more, particularly from the Internet. His company has grown from one man to 45 employees, and it recently opened a branch office in Brunswick.

But some customers are old-fashioned. And, according to Fish, they expect their exterminator to show up with a can.

"There still are many customers out there that don't want to pay for anything unless they spray something," he said.

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