

Safe ways to pest proof your home for winter

By Deborah Hall, Hoosier Times Homes October 30, 2001

This is the time of year when gardeners put their gardens to rest in anticipation of spending leisurely hours, snug in their homes, planning for spring. Unfortunately, insects and rodents seem to have much the same idea and move indoors along with us.

Since 1996, the Monroe County Community School Corp. has utilized an approach called Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to control pests in local schools in a safe and cost effective manner. The intent of the IPM method is to provide students with a learning environment that is free from unnecessary exposure to pests and harmful pesticides. If it is deemed necessary to use pesticides, those recognized as “less toxic” are considered first, thus posing less inherent danger to the students’ health and environment.

Homeowners who are interested in this type of approach to pest management can learn from the schools and apply IPM methods to their own housekeeping routines.

John Carter, MCCSC planning director, and Jerry Jochim, MCCSC IPM coordinator, believe the pest management methods that work well in the school environment can be applied with similar success to the home setting.

Documentation demonstrates that IPM techniques significantly decrease risks of exposure to chemicals and pesticides while costing no more than

traditional pest control and extermination programs. Carter describes IPM as “an approach to pest control that relies on common sense practices rather than depending primarily on pesticide applications.”

Here’s how it works:

Think like a pest. In order to effectively discourage pests, one needs to understand how these nuisances live and what makes an environment attractive to them. Jochim defines the primary goal of IPM as “finding the cause of pest problems. Understand that pests basically have the same needs as humans: food, shelter and water. Eliminate sources that provide for these needs and you’re well on your way to controlling pest problems.” The flies, mice, cockroaches and ants that are drawn to the school grounds are equally attracted to your home environment. There are three keys to success in implementing nonchemical pest management in your home: cleanliness, clutter and exclusion.

Cleanliness. Sound housekeeping practices can help make your home a much less attractive habitat for rodents and insects. Eliminate opportunities for the critters to become pests. Store food in sealed glass or plastic containers. Clean up leftover food. Limit food and beverage use to designated areas that are easy to monitor and keep clean. The stereotypical teenager’s room strewn with dirty clothes, empty soda cans, apple cores and potato chip crumbs provides an alluring setting for insects and rodents.

Regular vacuuming and daily emptying of trash go a long way toward reducing pest invasions. Contain trash in heavy-duty bags that are less prone to breaking and leaking. Seal them securely. Keep garbage cans tightly closed.

Rinse out garbage containers to reduce odors that attract pests. Wipe up spills from counters and floors. Store pet food in pest proof containers.

Eliminate standing water in flowerpot saucers, watering cans and gutters.

Clutter. Pests seek warm, dark, undisturbed habitats. Closets, basements and garages that are stacked with boxes, old newspapers, magazines, and other long-forgotten items offer pests a number of attractive living spaces.

“The problem with a cluttered environment is that you don’t know what you’ve got in there. Once a pest gets into a typical closet or basement, you may not detect its presence until the population has gotten out of control,”

according to Carter.

Once again, common sense prevails. Sort through and throw away things that have outlived their usefulness. Store things you want to keep in pest proof containers. Using corrugated cardboard boxes may not be a good option, as cockroaches eat glue and will readily take up residence in the corrugation. If you do use boxes, Jochim recommends placing the box in a garbage bag, which you then seal with tape. If you have boxes that have been unopened for a long time, Jochim says that sealing them in a garbage bag and placing them in the sun for several hours will kill most insects that may have taken up residence there. Keeping items, especially boxes, a few inches from the wall allows space for you to periodically check for pests.

Exclusion. There are a number of ways to close off entryways into your home.

Use screens on your doors and windows. Place screen covers over floor drains. Install weather stripping around windows and doors.

“It’s important to make sure your house is tight. If you can see daylight

around your door, insects can get in. Mice can squeeze through gaps as small as one-quarter inch,” Jochim says.

Caulk openings around cable and pipe access points. Inspect the products you bring into your home to assure that you don’t bring insects in along with food and supplies. “A bonus of employing the exclusion methods of IPM”, notes Carter, “is that they go hand in hand with energy conservation.”

To successfully implement IPM in your home, take a look around. Ask yourself some questions. Do pests have ways to enter your home? What can they find to eat? Have you provided living conditions that are agreeable to them? IPM offers methods to effectively insure that, come winter, you won’t be sharing your cozy environs with unwanted visitors.