British Gardeners and Chemicals, 1957- 1977

My PhD research focuses on several different case studies of users and uses of chemicals in the British home between the 1930s and the 1980s. One of these case studies is gardening. The people who willingly buy and use chemicals in their gardens are an important part of the story of living in a toxic world. In this paper, I will look at how regulation of chemical products destined for domestic consumers was communicated to the consumers themselves through books, newspaper and magazine stories, product packaging and adverts.

Beginning in 1957, the Pesticide Safety Precautionary Scheme and the Agricultural Chemicals Approval Scheme impacted domestic users, as well as the named agricultural users, as all new chemical preparations had to first pass the PSPS, then the ACAS before being marketed. A graphic symbol “A” was adopted to signal to consumers that the chemicals they chose for use in their gardens had been through these processes. It appeared on packaging and also in advertisements, as well as in books. “Chemicals for the Gardener” produced in 1963 was a publication produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) who had worked with chemical industry representatives to develop and implement the approval system. The booklet was for domestic users, which publicised the safety schemes and the use of the A symbol, along with the names of branded products which bore it.

This booklet was not well received, due to stunningly low awareness of current affairs regarding the effects of chemicals on wildlife. Joyce Butler, MP for Wood Green London, argued for the 1965 booklet’s revision to include information about the safe and appropriate use of garden chemicals. Butler, a highly professional politician for almost all her adult life, capitalised on her persona of “housewife” during her promotion of measures that elevated consumer choice and safety. After this success Butler continued her interest in chemicals and consumers, going on to champion the 1967 Farm and Garden Chemicals Act. This focussed on clear labelling which consumers had often highlighted as a problem. However, what consumers wanted to see on labels and what politicians and chemical companies thought they *should* see differed somewhat.

After the embarrassing MAFF publication, in the 1970s the British Agrochemicals Association took firmer control of the presentation of chemical products and their regulation to domestic users. They still referred to MAFF, with its associated authority but did not focus on diagnosing pest problems and prescribing chemicals. Instead it produced a directory listing the active chemicals in branded garden products along with reminders of responsible use and disposal. The PSPS and ACAS processes were briefly, described and the suggestion of industry openness was provided through the contact information supplied.

Despite the emphasis from MAFF and the Agrochemicals Association on new, better, and approved synthetic chemicals, gardeners still used old, tried and tested but not formally evaluated chemicals. These were included in the information booklets and directories, and their use featured regularly in garden advice columns, but they could not carry the “A” symbol. Even though these less-regulated chemicals may have caused poisonings, fires or were used in bombs, newly synthesised chemicals appeared to occupy a new realm, calling for a new kind of reassurance. For these strange new chemicals entering the marketplace when unknown long term toxic effects on bodily and environmental health had been pushed into the public consciousness, a system which promised to take the place of years of experience, was welcomed.

Main actors: domestic users, MAFF, British Agrochemicals Association, Joyce Butler MP Approaches: material culture, popular literature, archival sources