

The Bee Line



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Behind the sign: Portland Protectors works to make the community safe for bees (and all of us!)

Avery Yale Kamila and Maggie Knowles, co-founders of Portland Protectors, are the driving force behind a local movement to change attitudes about pesticide use. Their small white "Bee Safe" signs are popping up on lawns all across southern Maine. Through education and advocacy, they are making places safe for wildlife, children and families one public space and private yard at a time. The Bee Line had a chance to talk with them about their efforts and learn what beekeepers can do to promote healthier communities for our bees and ourselves.

BL: What is Portland Protectors and how did it get started?

AYK: Portland Protectors is an all-volunteer, grassroots effort to protect kids, bees and waterways in Portland by getting the city to pass an organic land care ordinance. We formed in early 2015 when both Maggie and I talked and realized we

were both boiling over with frustration about our children, families and properties being exposed to pesticides applied by city workers and neighbors. So she and I decided to do something about it and formed Portland Protectors.

We quickly connected with others in Portland, the surrounding communities and across the state working on reducing cosmetic pesticide use. Today there are 27 Maine towns and cities that have passed ordinances restricting pesticide use in their communities. **South Portland** and **Ogunquit** have two of the strongest organic land care ordinances in the country.

Meanwhile, citizens in many other Maine towns are organizing to address cosmetic pesticide use in their communities. Maggie (who now lives in Yarmouth) and the Royal River Conservation Trust launched **Yarmouth Protectors** last year. **Falmouth** citizens didn't form a group or name their effort but they have convinced their town council to draft a pesticide ordinance, which hasn't yet been made public. **York** is doing the same and expects to have a question on the town ballot in November about it. In the last few weeks, **Sanford Protectors** and **North Berwick Protectors** have both formed to work on the issue of pesticide use. I've also talked with residents interested in forming a citizen group to restrict pesticide use in **Freeport**.

BL: What are the most important things people should know about pesticides - their use, their effect on people, animals, and the environment?

AYK: Pesticides, which include herbicides, fungicides, and rodenticides, all have varying degrees of risk and toxicity. They can be grouped into two general categories. The first is the most familiar: synthetic pesticides used on conventional landscapes and farms. These include glyphosate (Roundup), neonicotinoids, atrazine and insect growth regulators and are the substances that were developed from chemical warfare agents following the end of World War II.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Academy of Sciences and the 2010 President's Cancer Panel have all concluded that pesticide exposure is linked to reproductive disorders, birth defects, learning disabilities, neurological disease, endocrine disorders and cancer.

We also know that synthetic pesticides break down very slowly in the environment, with their degradation measured in half lives like radioactive material. Pesticides can be found in soil decades after they were applied.

The second category of pesticides is organic. In contrast to synthetic pesticides, those allowed under the National Organic Program break down rapidly in the environment and have lower risks of acute and long-term toxicity. These pesticides tend to be made from natural substances, including botanical oils and biological substances, such as bacteria and nematodes.

We also know that properly maintained organic, ornamental landscapes don't actually need a lot (or any) organic pesticides. Organic land care is not centered on
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buying and applying products, as conventional land care is. Instead organic land care is about building soil fertility and soil health and thereby increasing the health of the plants and the wider ecosystem.

This is all relevant to honeybees and wild pollinators, who are harmed by the pesticides they come in contact with while foraging. Some studies have shown the pesticide exposure is greater for bees foraging around homes than around farm fields.

Which brings me to another point: The sale of lawn care pesticides in Maine rose 700 percent between 1995 and 2011, which is the year when the Maine Board of Pesticides Control stopped publishing pesticide sales data. That move is part of a larger reshuffling at the agency that has seen pesticide reduction programs eliminated, educational campaigns yanked from the airwaves and the state's free pesticide notification registry replaced with a yearly fee.

BL: Could you please update us about the progress on changing the ordinances in Portland regarding pesticide use?

AYK: Since we began Portland Protectors, the city has stopped spraying Roundup on city sidewalks (which had been a regular practice for decades and the subject of citizen organizing since 2001). This was a huge victory and happened last summer. Portland's Parks Department has been working to reduce pesticide usage on the 720 acres it manages. The city reported last week that most of that land is not routinely treated with pesticides, except when there is a tree infestation, a dangerous plant (such as poison ivy), a dangerous insect (such as wasps), or an invasive species (such as Japanese knotweed).

But 11 of those 720 acres continue to get regular synthetic pesticide applications. The places with the highest levels of pesticide use include the Riverside Golf Course, the

Deering Oaks Park softball field and football field, all the fields around Deering High School, the athletic field by the Back Cove parking lot, the Payson Park field, and Fox Field.

We applaud the city for reducing its

applicators and a business ally. As a result, when it concluded its work this winter, the task force ended up producing an ordinance based on a pesticide industry document. This ordinance treats synthetic and organic pesticides the same and only applies to lawns, driveways, walkways and patios. It



Co-founders of Portland Protectors Maggie Knowles, third from left, and Avery Yale Kamila, second from right, with a brain trust of organic experts after the June 21 pesticide ordinance public hearing in Portland. From left, executive director of Beyond Pesticides Jay Feldman, Falmouth town councilor Andy Jones, lawn & garden head at Eldredge Lumber & Hardware John Bochert, and owner of Eldredge Lumber & Hardware Scott Eldredge. Scott Eldredge told the group that sales in the lawn & garden department are up 40% since the store started phasing out synthetic pesticides. He's surprised more hardware stores haven't made this switch to organic. It's what Mainers want.

Photo courtesy of Portland Protectors

synthetic pesticide use but we don't accept that our children should have to be exposed to synthetic pesticides when playing sports in Portland. Many other communities in Maine maintain their athletic fields organically. We want Portland residents to have that same high standard of living.

After asking the City Council to address this issue for a year and a half, last year the council appointed a Pesticide & Fertilizer Task Force, of which I was appointed the citizen advocate. Unfortunately, this task force was dominated by four pesticide

exempts gardens, fence lines, trees and playgrounds. It has a very ill-defined waiver provision that will allow property owners to bypass organic options and apply for a waiver to use synthetic pesticides. The task force ordinance doesn't aim to educate residents on how to care for land organically.

The City Council's sustainability subcommittee held a public hearing last week (June 21) on the task force ordinance and the much stronger South Portland organic land
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care ordinance, which that city adopted last summer. Council chambers were packed for the hearing, and twenty-four people spoke in favor of the South Portland ordinance; five spoke in favor of the task force ordinance; and one took no position. This subcommittee hopes to make a recommendation to the full council by September.

BL: What can beekeepers do in their communities to curb the use of pesticides on public and private property?

MK: The most important thing to do is be gentle with outreach. It is easy to get frustrated and want to stomp and scream when witnessing neighbors spraying blooming trees, dandelions, or little weeds that can be easily plucked with two fingers. It is good to start a dialogue by assuming they really do not realize the toxic effects of these chemicals on pollinators and their land—and we find most people really do not realize. (The ones who DO realize and don't care are the ones to avoid. Use your energy on the willing ears.) Many people are intimidated to talk one-on-one so holding a casual neighborhood gathering titled, "Native Plants to Add to Your Garden to Attract Bees and Butterflies" or "Come Try Recipes I Made with my Honey" is a safe gateway to holding a conversation that includes education around pesticides and organic gardening. People get very excited to learn more about attracting pollinators...and there is your opportunity to advocate for them.

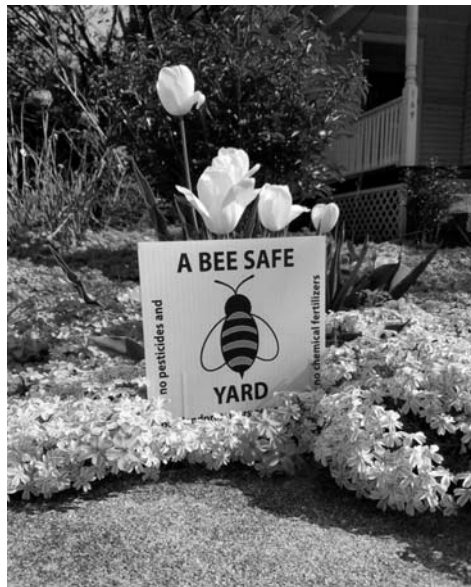
BL: How do you approach these issues when they may be perceived as against business, big companies or agriculture?

MK: When you have owned a business or had a job that has been the same for years, change is scary. We get that. We are not anti-business. We are pro-environment and public health. We highlight businesses that have crossed the green bridge to offering organic products and services and they say across the board their profits have gone UP. We publicize these success stories in hopes the ones clinging to the old model will see

there is opportunity for them as well. It starts with education - an organic ordinance will happen and the folks who have been educating themselves on how to transition will be in a ripe spot for a booming (blooming!) business.

BL: Please tell us about the "Bee Safe" signs. How many do you estimate have been placed in yards? How can people get a yard sign?

MK: Another way to start a conversation with your neighbors is by placing a "Bee Safe" yard sign in your garden. They are such a fun and happy way to start an interaction; often when I am weeding someone will comment on my signage and their curiosity turns into an educational chat - and before I know it they are asking how they can get one!



Bee Safe sign photos courtesy of Portland Protectors

We launched the "Bee Safe" sign campaign in 2016 to give a visual to the City Councilors who were not convinced the pesticide issue was something their constituents really cared about (they know now!), as well as a tool to highlight organic yards in Portland. We love posting pictures on facebook of our supporters and their signs. I think we have close to 700 signs in Portland—but we have seen them in Kennebunkport, Freeport and beyond. We

have signs at **The Honey Exchange, Maine Mead Works, Portland Food Co-op, Rosemont Markets** and we can also deliver them locally. We ask for a \$10 donation to cover printing costs and so we can order more.

BL: How would concerned citizens elsewhere in the state get started with a project like Portland Protectors?

MK: The more communities that assemble to start an organic lawn care movement the better. All it takes is passion, some dedicated people and a social media outlet. We are happy to share our Bee logo with any group - the consistency of the logo goes a long way. Our dream is to get a statewide ordinance passed eventually - we have so many shared natural resources to protect and it just makes sense that connected communities all follow the same guidelines. Anyone is welcome to reach out for advice and support. We are so grateful for your efforts. 🐝

Avery Yale Kamila has been writing for the Portland Press Herald for more than a decade and currently writes a food column for the Wednesday Food & Dining section. She has also worked in communications for environmental and health groups. Her degree is in environmental science with a concentration in risk management from the SUNY, College of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse University. Avery grew up on an organic farm in Maine near her grandfather's conventional farm.

Maine native Maggie Knowles has been a writer for over a decade and a beekeeper for five seasons. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Sustainability so she can further inspire her community to live in harmony with the natural resources around them.

More info:
<https://www.change.org/p/petition-make-portland-maine-an-organic-city>
Visit Portland Protectors on facebook or at portlandprotectors.org