



John Buerger may be taking the idea of "know thy enemy" to heart as he checks out a patch of evil Russian knapweed. Jim Noelker photo.

weed. Jim Noelker photo.

Naturally, John Buerger fights weeds, insects and pond scum

By Heather McGregor
Staff Writer

John Buerger calls the use of agricultural chemicals a "vicious cycle."

"It's like starting on heroin or something," said Buerger, 50, of New Castle, an agronomist who has spent much of his life working on farms and ranches.

He is making a business, called Alpha Natural Pest Controls and Fertilizers, of advising farmers and gardeners about natural and organic compounds that get rid of unwanted insects and weeds, and applying the products.

He's also waging a battle against pond scum, and he believes he has a solution to the roadside plant mortality resulting from using magnesium chloride de-icing spray.

Alpha Natural is based at Buerger's home in New Castle. But the business is really in Buerger's head and his white pickup truck, which he uses to haul his potions to trouble spots in the area.

For example, Main Elk Creek resident Jack Colven sought Buerger's help to control an infestation of box elder bugs, the black and red bugs that often invite themselves into homes.

"They were all over the place," Colven said. "He put some powder around the doors and the foundation of the house, and it seemed to take care of them very well. This year, we've only had a couple of them."

The powder drove away the bugs, but it's not a poison.

Buerger had a chemical applicator's license, but he threw it away because he believes toxic chemicals do far more harm than good. The same goes for chemical fertilizers.

Instead, he has searched the country for manufacturers of natural fertilizers and pest controls.

"Until now, the public hasn't had access to these fertilizers and pest controls except through catalogs. Now they're available to Joe Public, either by purchasing from me or having me apply them," Buerger said.

His truckload of remedies includes garlic solutions, diatomaceous earth, sea kelp and fish fertilizers, liquid calcium, microscopic nematodes and microbes that eat the blue-green algae that form icky pond scum.

His years of experience help him decide which remedies to use.

How he started

Buerger grew up in Golden and

Kremming, running cows between summer and winter pastures. He earned a forestry degree from Mesa College, worked for the U.S. Forest Service for a year in Paonia and then worked a three-year tour for the Peace Corps in Ecuador.

Later, Buerger farmed in Costa Rica, trying his skills in raising cinnamon and black pepper. That part didn't work so well, but he did stay afloat teaching and raising chickens.

By 1976 Buerger was back in Western Colorado, working on farms and ranches in Grand, Delta and Garfield counties. He's made his home in New Castle since 1995.

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- John Buerger

"I've been looking at weeds and dirt forever," Buerger said. "In the last several years, it came together," he said, referring to his business of consulting with landowners on weed and pest problems.

For weed infestations, Buerger believes the weeds themselves are the best indicators of what's wrong. He contends that weeds thrive in poor soils, and farmers and gardeners can actually fertilize their way out of a weed problem.

"Weeds are taking over the Western U.S. Thistle, knapweed, toadflax, they are all rhizome-spreaders. As long as people throw salt-based fertilizers in their hay fields, these species will move in," he said.

(Rhizomes are the underground roots that spread out and send up new shoots. Another commonplace rhizome-spreader is bindweed.)

"If we can build the topsoil, and make it become a living organism, then it can start to rot out a lot of rhizome-spreading weeds," he said.

He said late summer is the ideal time to apply kelp and fish-based fertilizers, along with liquid calcium to loosen the soil. From Aug. 15 to the first hard frost is when weeds are drying out and going dormant.

"That's the season of the microbe. That's the crop I'm growing," Buerger said. "Soil barren of microbes will have more weeds."

"People who apply chemicals go back year after year. With this, once the product takes hold, you won't need to call me near as often. The microbes will still be working in the soils," he said.

He believes the same theory applies to the plant mortality resulting from the use of magnesium chloride. While the chemical blend makes an excellent road de-icer, it runs off the road into the adjacent soils and creates hardpan soil conditions that smother out grasses, clover and shrubs.

Buerger contends that an annual application of liquid calcium would loosen the soil and allow beneficial plants to grow. As it is, beautiful roadside areas such as Glenwood Canyon are being overrun with noxious weeds such as gumweed, thistle and bindweed because that is all the soil can support.

"Calcium is a critical element in short supply in our environment. In these soils here, it's bound up with salts and iron," he said. "Calcium strengthens plants, builds soil, feeds soil microbes and develops a living topsoil."

Buerger has found a manufactured liquid calcium that is effective. But he hasn't yet been able to convince the Colorado Department of Transportation that the treatment is needed.

Control without poison

While Buerger's chief interest is in large-scale weed control on farms, ranches and open space, he's found that half of his business now involves pest control.

People who have problems with grasshoppers, ants, slugs, box elder bugs, ticks and flies often reach for poisons like malathion. But such poisons don't have a lasting effect, and they often kill a wide variety of beneficial insects, he said.

Buerger said once he evaluates a

problem, he'll decide whether to chase off the bugs with garlic solution, bring in enzymes or nematodes that attack harmful insects, or apply diatomaceous earth, which kills insects through a direct application.

He also helps gardeners figure out non-toxic ways to repel skunks, moles and deer.

And Buerger has found an effective treatment for pond scum. Again, the trick is microbes that biodegrade the nutrients, organic matter and hydrocarbons that sustain scum and algal blooms in ponds and fountains.

Buerger's been in the Alpha Nat-

ural business for four years, and he finds new techniques and products every year that are more effective.

He generally charges by the hour, with a rate that includes the products he applies. Treating a small yard to fight weeds, build soils and encourage healthy grass costs about \$50, and treating a pond for scum is the same price, with subsequent visits at \$35.

"I like to keep it reasonable," he said.

He also offers the products for sale to gardeners and farmers, once they've figured out what is most effective.

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