

Glyphosate and Allotments

Glyphosate is a component of many weedkillers, for example Roundup, sold for use by amateur gardeners. The Association uses it sparingly for example on our boundary fences, and in reclaiming plots where there is persistent perennial weed.

In the past we have considered its use and decided that banning it at this point in time would be:

- **Impractical** – heavy-handed, hard to police and would limit our use in terms of returning severely weed-infested plots to use so they can be rented out again. Even the RHS recommends the use of glyphosate when first clearing an allotment plot of weeds.
- **Controversial** – despite many reports the case against glyphosate is not yet conclusive and many of our members will probably want to carry on using it in a safe manner:
 - “Possible carcinogen” – cases of cancer that have been linked to glyphosate relate to professional sprayers with decades of commercial exposure.
 - “Harms wildlife” – numerous scientific and regulatory reviews consistently conclude that use of glyphosate and following the instructions does not pose a significant risk of either direct acute or chronic toxicity to terrestrial species. (Note this does not cover aquatic species – so this needs guidance – below)
 - “Persistent” – glyphosate is non-persistent in plants, soils, water and sediments, due largely to a number of microorganisms that break down glyphosate for food, removing it from the ecosystem. Studies show that it takes only a few days to a few weeks for 50% of the glyphosate to dissipate. In soils, low residue levels may be detected for up to a year following treatment; however, such residues are considered to be strongly bound, biologically unavailable and not of toxicological significance.

If we have to do something while stopping short of a site-wide ban, this leaves us with the third option – to draw up rules for the safer use of glyphosate etc. on allotments.

• **Acceptable use (e.g. for persistent but not annual weeds)**

This is probably the number one rule. Annual weeds are so simple to keep in check by hoeing, strimmers or using barriers (plastic or cardboard), there should be no need for weedkiller to tackle them (perhaps with the exception of abandoned plots – although if abandoned you can be reasonably sure persistent weeds will also have established).

• **Do not use on the stream bank**

This is sensible and complies with the law. The Health & Safety Executive Code of Practice for Using Plant Protection Products (Section 4.6.13) states: “very few pesticides are approved for use in or near water and you must give notice to, and get permission from, the Environment Agency before using a pesticide in these situations.” √ This would not impact members as no plots are within 5 metres of the Castle Mill Stream. Plots 1 to 30 are next the Fiddlers Stream but now separated by 2-5 metres which accommodates the Badger fence. We spray this once a year and the verdant growth alongside the stream acts as a high barrier and we can see it remains unaffected. It has rarely, if ever, been used on Cripsey Island.

• Do not spray within 1 metre of other allotments

On the face of it this would seem sensible. However, the paths between plots can be anything from 50cm to 1 metre so members might be tempted to spray all the way to the edge of their plots. √ In addition, persistent weeds usually colonise into plots from the paths so it is this very interface where weedkiller is most likely to be used.

The Committee prefers not setting a distance rule, focussing more on rules for 'intelligent spraying' detailed further on.

• Can you store on your allotment?

If folk are going to use glyphosate or other chemicals on their plots there would probably be more problems with these being constantly transported back and forwards than if they were kept securely in sheds, clearly labelled and up high out of the reach of both children and floods!

• Limit the number of uses per year? Define acceptable times of year to use?

The Committee doesn't think either of these are sensible. The first suggests that members have a 'quota' – a number of times they can deploy before they're banned. The second doesn't make sense either as glyphosate only works on actively growing plants – effectively ruling out up to half the year. Also suggesting members had to wait until 'open season' for weeds begins is a bit odd. You want to tackle e.g. bindweed as soon as you spot it and not let it spread.

• Use only on days with little or no wind

The Committee completely agrees with this suggestion.

'Intelligent spraying' – things to consider:

ONLY consider spraying if there is little or no wind, e.g. early in the morning (check any flags on site) and take account of wind direction if it is obvious and consistent.

The HSE Code of Practice says not to use herbicides when rain is expected, when it is **windy** or when the soil is **saturated**. This is to reduce the risk of herbicides spreading into or over other parts of the site.

Check the short-term weather forecast. There is little or no point in spraying if rain is expected the same day. Remember - weedkiller likes boots ..you can transport it on the soles!

Glyphosate needs to be applied while the plant is actively growing and transpiring moisture, which requires sunlight. This means you need to apply glyphosate in the morning so it will take effect the same day. Glyphosate is deactivated very easily so applying late in the day, even if it doesn't rain, is likely to be ineffective. Apply in the morning on a day expected to be sunny and warm with no rain.

Consider buying **a spray cone** that clips onto the end of the lance – cheap and effective, they focus the spray onto the intended area.

Make a spray screen – this can be made from two bits of plastic about 1m high, and allows careful application of weed killer and avoid drift and wind eddy dispersal

A balanced approach – some comments from other allotment blogs:

- *“When used to clear weedy ground, all the organic matter and nutrients in the dead weeds go back into the ground. There is no wastage of organic material by burning or dumping.”*
- *“Often the soil structure of a weedy new plot has benefited from years of plant growth. Why destroy this structure by digging?”*
- *“It facilitates minimum cultivation systems, which preserve soil organic matter, worms and soil life.”*
- *“When used to enable zero cultivation, its effects become more interesting. You might not like the liverwort and moss, but as a habitat for wildlife at the bottom of the food chain, they are superb.”*

In conclusion:

- There may be a national ban in the future – at which point these rules will need to be revisited. • The licence for glyphosate use in the EU has recently been under discussion. After a long battle between the agricultural industry, who wanted a full 15 year renewal, and concerned environmental NGOs and individuals, who wanted glyphosate banned - a licence has been granted. But only for 5 years.
- The EU Commission also added certain recommendations for its use: to ban the co-formulant, POEtallowamine; and to minimise its use in specific areas, such as public parks and playgrounds. To date it is unclear if the UK government is prepared to accept these recommendations.