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Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano and Joanne Grossman, owner of Larchmont Nurseries and Greenhouses, yesterday announce an alliance they've formed to encourage the use of alternatives to toxic pesticides.

REGION

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Chemical pesticides seen as quick fix with bad effects

Exhibit teaches organic methods to stop weeds, bugs

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The Journal News

Hundreds of ladybugs crawled on the floor yesterday at Larchmont Nurseries and Greenhouses, and milled around a table featuring pamphlets about natural alternatives to pesticide use.

The red and black beetles are sold at the store because they eat aphids, those soft-bodied insects that can destroy plants. And the exhibit unveiled yesterday by Westchester County officials is part of an education effort to reduce the use of chemical pesticides around the county.

"What you see here is the beginning of an outreach to most nurseries and other areas that can communicate with people who do lawns, put in shrubs, etc.," said Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano. "And getting the commercial establishments involved

with us is really very important."

The chemicals used in pesticides can run off into the local drinking water supply, said county Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua Lipsman, adding that many common chemicals have caused tumors and birth defects in laboratory animals when administered in high concentrations.

"We can only assume that if these chemicals accumulated in the environment, in the water and in the food chain, that they're going to end up having some kind of a negative impact on human health," Lipsman said.

That's why Joanne Grossman, owner of the nursery, has discouraged her customers from using pesticides and asked Spano how she could help teach the public about their dangers.

"A lot of people don't know what they're doing or it's not necessary," Grossman said of pesticide use.

The pamphlets list ways to maintain local lawns and gardens without pesticides. Corn gluten can be used to fertilize a lawn and prevent weeds from reseeding. Marigolds and nasturtium repel insects, while

dogwood and holly trees attract birds that eat some of the harmful bugs.

The exhibit at the nursery is part of the county's public education campaign, called "Keep Our Water H2O." The county will phase out most of its chemical pesticide use by Jan. 1, 2002, and has opted into a state law that requires neighbors be given 48 hours notice before pesticides are used near their homes.

Still, even with the natural alternatives, many people use toxic pesticides because they work much quicker, Grossman said. Chemical pesticides can eliminate lawn problems in a week, while it can take two years to revitalize the soil organically, Grossman said.

While not carrying some of the more toxic chemicals has reduced profits, Grossman said she does not regret her decision because of the pesticides' harmful effects.

"It does hurt the business, but you know what — I don't care," Grossman said. "If it doesn't hurt the business, it's gonna hurt the kids."