

Eco-friendly insect, rodent control products, services in demand

Clare Trapasso

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NEW YORK - Detergent water, vacuum cleaners, door sweeps.

These simple household products are on the front lines of "green" pest control.

Amid a new wave of environmentalism, eco-savvy consumers are realizing they no longer need to rely on traditional pesticides which may pose health risks to combat rodents and insects.

Environmentally friendly exterminating services, dubbed integrative pest management, are popping up across the nation. The companies, who mostly work with commercial clients, say the demand for their services is on the rise.

"Traditional pest control companies run around spraying pesticides," said Joel Sklar, vice president of sales at Assured Environments, an integrated pest management company in Manhattan. "We're using glue traps to find out where there are animals and pests ... and we seal holes and areas to prevent them from getting in."

Instead of using chemicals, eco-warriors investigate how and why pests infiltrate a building. Then they rely on detergent water, vacuum cleaners and low or no-toxicity products to fight the problem.

"Probably the best product out there is a door sweep," said Tom Green, president of the Integrated Pest Management Institute North America, Inc. in Wisconsin, referring to the vinyl strips installed on the bottoms of doors.

"A mouse can squeeze through a hole the size of a pencil diameter. So if you've got a quarter-inch gap underneath your door, as far as a mouse is concerned, there's no door there at all."

He also recommends using sealant on cracks to keep bugs from getting inside homes and moving garbage cans far from residential buildings to keep rodents away.

Besides such prevention strategies, green pest control products are also in demand.

"Natural pest controls are the fastest growing part of our business," said Eric Vinje, owner of Planet Natural, an online and catalog-based organic gardening supply business based in Montana. "A lot of the ingredients in these products are everyday ingredients, like mint oil or orange peel."

His most popular products include Orange Guard, which suffocates insects, and Diatomaceous Earth, made from skeletal remains of plants that can cut through insects' protective shells and kill them. He also recommended boric acid-based products, like Terra Ant Killer.

"It acts as a stomach poison to insects," Vinje said. But "for us, it's about as toxic as table salt."

Vinje also provides clients with more unusual solutions.

Last October, for instance, his company sent more than 720,000 ladybugs to two Manhattan apartment complexes where the landscaping was being decimated by aphids and mites. The red-and-black bugs were unleashed on the 80-acre grounds to eat the pests.

The stakes are high in the battle against pests.

Research has shown that cockroach and rodent infestations can pose health risks, with children who live in poorly maintained, low-income housing particularly susceptible.

"Their airways and lungs are still developing," said Anhtu Hoang, a former biologist and general counsel at We Act for Environmental Justice, an environmental justice organization in West Harlem. "They tend to be lower on the ground."

Hoang gave some examples of the health risks: Roach wings and excrement "dry up and create an asthma trigger" when they get into the air, and chemicals and sprays can sometimes exacerbate the problem.

Green, whose organization certifies green exterminating companies, says there are always going to be situations where a pesticide is needed. But he also believes the demand for natural pest management services and products is growing.

"The pesticide manufacturing industry has really worked hard over the last 10 years to bring new products to market that are much less toxic," he said. "We're making a lot of progress."

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