

COTTAGE

Recently, I had a scary barbecue experience. After lighting the grill, I moved to turn up the heat and found flames coming out of the barbecue around the dial. What caused this and how do I prevent it?

—MICHAEL JAMES, PARHAM, ONT.

It sounds like there is a blockage preventing the gas from flowing evenly from the control knobs to the burner, says Joel Waisglass, president of Sobie's Barbucos in Toronto. Although it may be caused by a defective valve, the most likely culprits is a spider. They climb inside the two venturi tubes that transmit gas or propane to the burner. A venturi tube is a lovely home for a spider because it's a dark, enclosed space. But when the spider spins its silk and plugs the hole to protect itself, you are in for a potential eyebrow scorching, or worse.

A good solution is a venturi tube cleaner (cost: about \$7). "It's basically an 18-inch toothbrush with a flexible wire head," says Waisglass. In the spring, before you start your grill for the season, insert the brush into each venturi tube and twist it around, which should solve the problem. You may have to disconnect the burner to get to them, depending on the make and model of your barbecue. It's probably a good idea to clear out the venturi tubes regularly throughout the summer, too, particularly at the cottage where spiders abound. And while you're at it, check the status of your burner, Waisglass advises. A season's worth of delicious marinade, sauce, and fat drippings can clog the holes in it, preventing the gas from flowing properly, which can result in a fire. Unclogging burner holes is simple: just regularly rub them down



with a steel wire brush. An accumulation of oily gunk in the drip pan might also set off a grease fire, adds Dave Burt of Ontario Gas BBQ in Concord, Ont., popping the dials right off the barbecue and seizing the valves.

We are planning to put in a small vegetable garden at our cottage but our property has a shortage of topsoil and an abundance of herbivorous animals. Can you provide any tips that will increase our chances of success?

—TERRY BEETTAM, BANCROFT, ONT.

"There is a reason there aren't a lot of farms up there," says Cathy Dueck, manager of the Ecology Park with Peterborough Green-Up, a program that supports environmentally sound gardening. Vegetables need about a third of a metre of fertile soil, eight hours of full sun, and fairly neutral soil. Cottagers gardening on the Canadian Shield face a double threat before even taking critters into consideration – thin, acidic soil and forested shade.

If you still want to persevere with your garden plans, Dueck advises using raised

beds and filling them with either bags of sterilized topsoil or loose soil delivered from a local source. (Importing soil from elsewhere might introduce non-native weed seeds to the area.) You should also augment the soil with lime, to neutralize acidity, and well-aged manure or compost, to up the nutrient levels. (But only do this if the garden is at least 30 metres from the water.) Robert Allen, owner of Northway Gardeners, near Utterson, Ont., says cool-weather crops such as lettuce and spinach, which can be planted earlier in the season, will tolerate partial shade. Try growing wild leeks, a native vegetable easily cultivated in your area. Low-maintenance crops – those that don't require regular feeding and are resilient to frost, such as carrots, peas, broccoli, and cherry tomatoes – should also do well, provided they get enough sun. Dueck also suggests mulching with a non-acidic material such as clean straw to keep moisture in and weeds at bay.

No matter what you grow, it will be a veritable smorgasbord to passing wildlife. Enclosing the garden in chicken wire is your best defence against marauders, with one notable exception.

STILL LOOKING FOR ANSWERS?

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“Deer are really good jumpers,” says Jan McDonnell, wildlife biologist at the Ministry of Natural Resources’ (MNR) Bracebridge office. “So, you need a fence that’s eight feet tall.” McDonnell, an avid gardener, solved her deer problem by erecting an eight-foot-tall, black plastic mesh fence adorned with aluminum pie plates and holographic scare tape. “It looks really tacky,” she says, laughing. “But you know what? I don’t care.”

I’d like to dredge a small portion of our beach for a swimming area around the dock. I have visited the MNR and the Fisheries and Oceans websites and haven’t found any useful suggestions on how to do this. I would like to have some information before jumping into a contract with a professional.

—GARY BOYD, SPARROW LAKE, ONT.

Dredging is a big, dirty job that comes at a cost to both the environment and your wallet, and a permit is always required. You may not get one, however, if the area you want to dredge is a prime fish habitat or a major spawning site, if there are species at risk, or if there’s a wildlife sanctuary in the immediate vicinity, says Wayne Mitchell, Parks Canada’s realty manager for the Trent-Severn Waterway. Changing water depth can prevent aquatic plants that previously flourished from growing back, which in turn damages fish habitat, says Dan Thompson, senior habitat biologist for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Parry Sound. Removing sand until clay is exposed may have a negative environmental impact, Thompson explains, because not much grows in hard clay. “Dredging should be a last resort.”

If you are granted a permit, expect to shell out big bucks. Heavy equipment may have to be floated to the site, and you pay from the moment the rig leaves the yard until it’s back on its home turf, to the tune of \$120 an hour. At his Peterborough excavating company, Donnie La Fonte uses a digging rig set on tracks with a bucket and a 15-metre boom that swings out to the dredge site from shore. The material is scooped out and piled up on land. You’ll need to

prove that, once there, it’s far enough away from the lake that it won’t leach back in the next rainstorm. If you can’t, the MNR will require disposal of it off-site, and additional hauling and dumping costs will apply. You also won’t be allowed to dredge from April 1 through Labour Day to avoid fish spawning seasons and cottage prime time.

In the end, dredging is a lot of work and money for something that may not solve the problem. “I have seen cases where people dredge, then in a couple of years they apply to do it again,” says Chris Near, senior lands technician at the Bracebridge MNR. Currents will simply push the sand and silt back into your swimming hole.

Cottagers looking to dredge their shore should first contact their municipal office to start the permit process. Since Sparrow Lake is part of the Trent-Severn, you’ll have to apply through the Parks Canada Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site office. Permits for cottagers not connected to the Trent-Severn are issued through their local MNR or conservation authority.

I need to rebuild our 30-year-old cottage porch and I should get a building permit, but I’m worried the building inspector will start looking around the cottage and force me to replace all sorts of other things that were built before anyone really worried about the Building Code. Can an inspector do this?

—WALT MCINNES, SUDBURY, ONT.

Contrary to popular belief, building inspectors aren’t out to get you. “I cannot go back and tell people who have old deck railings that they need to have them upgraded,” explains Ray Hachigian, chief building official for the Township of the Archipelago. “But when they want to replace that deck and come in for a permit, that’s when they have to consider the standards of today.” That said, if an inspector notices something seriously amiss at your cottage, he or she would doubtless have a word with you. “If I were out on the property and saw a sewage system that was spewing all over the ground, of course I would do something,” says Hachigian. So if a part of your cottage is threatening to roll down a hill, expect the inspector to raise an

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eyebrow. If, on the other hand, the bottom plank of your back step is a bit punky, it's unlikely the inspector will mention it even in passing.

If you're thinking about skipping the permit process, don't. If you're caught building your porch without the proper papers you may be fined and have to tear it down altogether.

My dog drinks from the lake all the time but he never seems to get sick. Don't dogs get beaver fever?

—VIVIAN RULE, CROSBY, ONT.

Yes, dogs can get beaver fever, a nasty disease whose symptoms include fatigue, stomach cramps, and diarrhea. It can be pretty unpleasant, but typically will run its course without intervention. Dogs get it the same way humans often do: by drinking water that contains *Giardia*, a single-celled parasite that is transmitted through the feces of infected animals. (Since beavers live in the water and, *ahem*, go in the lake, they are one of the chief transmitters, hence the name.)

However, just because dogs (or humans, for that matter) ingest infected water, it doesn't necessarily mean they will get sick. According to Murray Kennedy, a parasitologist with Alberta Agriculture's Food Safety Division, it takes anywhere from 10–100 *Giardia* cysts to establish an infection, and your dog's natural resistance to disease can ward it off before symptoms manifest, just as yours can. In addition, research is beginning to show that different strains of the parasite are restricted to different species, says Kennedy. Water that makes you sick might just leave your dog thirst-quenched.

But even if your pup has ingested a significant amount of an infecting strain, it's very possible that you'd never know, simply because dogs aren't as good as humans at communicating that they are ill. A dog may experience stomach cramps, but who can tell? Or he may sneak off into the back forty and leave some telltale traces, but he certainly won't be in the outhouse for hours like an infected human. 🐾

Kate Barker is a Toronto-based writer.