

Top up your measure of suspicion

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, September 16, 2015, p.22

Rats totally devastated my garden this year. They nibbled my tomatoes, even those high on the vine; they bit into my beets and zucchini; they chomped on my cucumbers and gnawed through the stalks of my pole and bush beans, killing all plants. They decapitated my sunflowers, mangling the heads on the ground. I bought traps and baited them with peanut butter. I've watched the rats slink past them. Clearly, for most rats suspicion is stronger than greed.

I never suspected suspicion's origin was a word – the Latin verb “susplicere” – that signified to look up at, and which was used figuratively with the meaning to admire, respect. Woven into this meaning is the sense of fear, dread, mistrust. Since the late 15th century, we've employed the verb suspect to also mean surmise, usually with negative overtones.

Rats could teach us a thing or two about suspicion. We evidently no longer possess it in sufficient measure. We've become complacent – a word formed from the Latin “complacere,” to be very pleasing, which in the 18th century acquired the sense of pleased with oneself. Thus lulled into feeling self-satisfied, we've neglected the defences of our primitive instinct for survival. We are now easily baited and trapped.

A few months ago I was glancing through a local supermarket flyer and noticed one of the pricier Crest toothpastes on sale at a ridiculously low price. How could I not take advantage of such an offer? I stocked up. When I opened the first tube the blue specks in the gel perplexed me, but I dismissed them as yet another gimmick. Soon

afterwards I read alarming news about certain tiny particles called microbeads found in various personal care products, including toothpaste. I learned that those blue specks in my tube of Crest were not another gimmick, but rather the controversial plastic particles called microbeads.

Microbeads – identified in a product’s ingredient list as polyethylene or polypropylene – remain in waste water and lead to plastic particle water pollution. They end up in the food chain, gobbled up by tiny fish, which are gobbled up in turn by other forms of marine life, and which eventually are consumed by us. Countries around the world are taking steps to ban microbeads. The European Union is at the forefront of this campaign. Canada announced this past summer that it would be adding microbeads to its list of toxic substances. Certain companies, such as Colgate-Palmolive and Unilever, have already phased them out.

The crisis that helped expose the danger of microbeads was the revelation in 2012 and 2013 of the extent to which they were polluting the Great Lakes. Lakes Superior and Huron revealed about 7,000 plastic particles per square kilometre, while Lake Michigan had 17,000, Lake Erie 46,000 and Lake Ontario 248,000.

Wary of the lures of irresistible offers in the weekly flyer, I’m now armed with a magnifying glass to peruse the tiny, generally illegible list of ingredients on packaging. If I spot polyethylene or polypropylene, I let suspicion overpower my temptation and walk away from the trap.