

How the Garlic War Was Won

An Interview with David Smorenburg

By Brenda Feuerstein

The following interview was conducted on December 21, 2006, with David Smorenburg, the importer of *Mosquito Barrier*, a garlic-based alternative pesticide that is human and environment friendly . . . and works fabulously!

Q: You recently were given Health Canada's go-ahead on the first nontoxic alternative to the usual toxic mosquito repellents. This represents a significant change in government policy and a personal triumph for you. Can you tell me a bit about your company and how this came about?

SMORENBURG: Sure. In 2002, we moved into a house in central Toronto. There are a few fruit trees in our yard, and my dad decided to spray the trees with Diazinon, which is a heavy-duty pesticide. Some of the pesticide got on the kid's toys and white plastic patio furniture. When the chemical didn't wash off with a hose, I actually had to get rubber gloves and wash it off by hand. I felt that there had to be something better out there, and so I started to investigate. This is how I discovered *Mosquito Barrier*, which is entirely based on garlic. To my surprise, garlic was not registered in Canada as a pesticide, so it was registered in the United States. I decided to bring garlic to Canadians.

Q: So, this is when you started the company Upper Canada Organics?

SMORENBURG: Yes. Since *Mosquito Barrier*, we've brought on other products. We import, create and distribute several other lines, and we've also designed an export distributorship in Hong Kong and China, to introduce a couple of lines to China.

Q: When you started to import *Mosquito Barrier*, this wasn't really your area of expertise at the time?

SMORENBURG: No, absolutely not! I worked in the food industry as a buyer of food ingredients, such as garlic, marshmallows and coconuts. Pest control was definitely not at the top of my list of career choices at the time! [Chuckles]

Q: Were you dealing in organic foods before that?

SMORENBURG: Not at all.

Q: But were you aware of the various issues regarding pesticides and organic food?

SMORENBURG: Only somewhat. Actually, during that summer I was laid off from the food ingredient company I had been working for, and I was approached by an organic freeze-dried manufacturer outside Canada to help bring their product into Canada. I approached my former employers about this, and they only scoffed at me.

Q: At the time, did you feel you might be able to make some change in the industry?

SMORENBURG: A little bit, but I was really more concerned about people as opposed to the whole industry. I just wanted to bring people better alternatives. The situation was quite crazy, as I discovered the more I researched it. For instance, the Federal Minister of Environment was actually promoting garlic as a safe alternative pesticide, but when I wanted to introduce it commercially, this was technically against the law, because you could not have anything over a half a litre for use as a pesticide. Well, I was breaking the law by even labeling garlic juice, which is what *Mosquito Barrier* is, for use on insects. While working in the food industry, I had imported big containers of garlic, but now I couldn't even bring in a single litre.

Q: Very strange that something we consume every day is illegal to use as a pesticide!

SMORENBURG: That's right!

Q: Can you tell me a bit more about the struggles you have had with getting *Mosquito Barrier* approved by the Canadian government?

SMORENBURG: Some market research had been done, and so I knew there was a need for the product. When I talked to some of my contacts in the chemical industry, I was warned that garlic would never be registered as a pesticide. But I just continued on. My initial interview with the Canadian government, which was conducted over the phone, proved rather frustrating. Among other things, the government scientists were asking me, "What if a child falls into a barrel of garlic juice? How would you label your product for such an eventuality?" I replied, "This stuff is so strong smelling that a child or most people wouldn't go near it, let alone jump into a drum of garlic juice." Then I asked them back, "What does it say on a drum of Malathion? What kind of warning does this product have?" They remained silent. The tone of the government officials was really condescending. I guess, because of the bureaucracy involved, they have to go through this whole exercise. Basically, they were telling me to just forget the whole idea.

Q: At that time, wasn't *Mosquito Barrier* legal to use as a pesticide in certain countries?

SMORENBURG: Yes, it was quite legal in the U.S. The EPA, which is the equivalent to the Ministry of Health in Canada, regulates pesticides. Back in the mid-80s, they put a whole new policy together about low-toxic risk to medium-risk pesticides. This included 30 ingredients, such as peppermint and cinnamon—mostly food items like soy products. There was no need to register these products, as they never had any issues with health and the environment. To take the burden off businesses and the consumers, these ingredients can be sold without any problem. So, I thought, the same policy should be applied here in Canada as well.

Q: Were there any other obstacles that you had to face?

SMORENBURG: After the presubmission stage, the government and some other agencies give you a list of what the requirements are. They asked for a chemistry report stating precisely what was in garlic, which is one of the most tested things in the world. Now, it's pretty difficult to find someone to do this kind of testing!

Q: So, you ended up with a document that you submitted to the government. How many pages was it?

SMORENBURG: The original document was 15 pages, but my response back to the government was over 700 pages of various documents about garlic.

Q: How long did that take you to compile?

SMORENBURG: On and off for a couple of months. We ended up hiring a nanny, so that I could work night and day to get this document ready.

Q: Once you had it submitted, what happened then?

SMORENBURG: After a while, the government officials acknowledged that they had received it. After a couple of months, they informed me that *Mosquito Barrier* was considered a reduced-risk product and that it will have a quicker time line. Then a few months passed, and I was told that they needed this and that, and that one of the forms wasn't filled out correctly. A couple of the people I dealt with one in Health Canada appreciate that they have to move forward on some of these products and they are helpful. But as a group they have not been very helpful. At one point, the officials wanted to know exactly what was in garlic. They call this a "deficiency letter." So, I had to contact the University of Guelph to do some research for me.

Q: Did you get any funding for this?

SMORENBURG: Right out of my own pocket! We had to sell some investment property. It's been a real struggle.

Q: That was back in 2002. Now let's talk about what happened more recently.

SMORENBURG: You're allowed two "deficiency letters," and I addressed their concerns. I was also constantly lobbying my MP and other MPs, as well as our Minister of Health; by the way, we've had three of them since I started this. I was constantly talking with lawyers and environmental lawyers and other people in the industry, who told me "Don't quit now; just keep going." However, the whole affair was quite demoralizing, because the process had not really moved forward in Canada. Then, on November 2, 2006, I received a two-page letter thanking me for my submission and stating that the government did not think it complete and that they needed a another year of field study for garlic. Basically, thanks but no thanks! I threw the letter down, quite upset. Later, I went to read the rest of it, and then I noticed that the last two paragraphs said something like "BUT we are in the process of changing our policy and are developing a new policy for low-toxic, non-conventional, and low-risk products, and we know that it is safe for the environment and for humans, and therefore we are allowing you to sell and market your product as a "area mosquito repelling agent."

SMORENBURG: I believe the whole exercise and also the lobbying had something to do with this new policy.

Q: Why do you think it took so long for the government to certify this simple product?

SMORENBURG: I can only guess, and I could be quite cynical about the whole thing. Big business moves slowly, but the government moves even slower! With all the lawyers wanting to dot the i's and cross the t's, and with considerations having to go from one committee to the next, it is very difficult to change governmental policies.

Q: Do you feel that the regulation of alternative products is far too complicated for the average person to make some change?

SMORENBURG: Definitely, people have called me up wanting to register the next greatest personal repellent, and when I've explained them what the process is all about, I never hear from them again. A lot of these products are plant based with essential oils and things like that so they would have some repellency just by the sheer nature of the product. The process is just too burdensome. It is a real shame because I think that during the last 15 to 20 years Canada has missed the boat on a number of these products.

Q: How do you see this approval as a major step for Canadians and the environment?

SMORENBURG: First of all, Canadians now have an alternative to Malathion and other chemical products like that. There is a glimmer of hope now that Health Canada is actually supporting a product that is low in toxicity and low in risk to the consumer and the environment.

Q: Do you think people will see *Mosquito Barrier* as an alternative to Malathion even with the so-called risk of West Nile disease?

SMORENBURG: They should, and why not? The tests have shown up to 95% repellency rate. You're not going to get every mosquito, but you won't with Malathion either. Malathion is an adulticide, which means it will only kill off adult mosquitoes. It has no repellency effect at all.

Q: As well, I understand that the droplet of Malathion would actually have to hit an individual mosquito to kill it.

SMORENBURG: Exactly!

Q: How about garlic juice—*Mosquito Barrier*—being used by towns and golf courses? Have you had much interest in this?

SMORENBURG: Yes, we have. Thane Clark, the Coordinator of Pesticide Monitoring & Control for Prince Edward Island, called me up and congratulated me on moving forward with *Mosquito Barrier*. PEI is a perfect province to be organic, because they have one of the highest rates of cancer per capita. I am not saying that pesticides are causing cancer, but there are some definite links to it. We have had lawn care guys asking us about it because they are losing business when spraying with chemical pesticides. There are only a few golf courses at this point that use low-toxic pesticides, but there is definitely a great interest.

Q: Why do you think the Canadian government had a change of heart about being more proactive in legalizing *Mosquito Barrier*?

SMORENBURG: I wonder whether it is just a lot of public pressure. Also, everyone from every political spectrum has tried this product and had pretty good results from it. NDP, PC, Liberal, and the Green Party have been right behind us. Perhaps there is a political will.

Q: Can you see that by the citizens of Canada putting more pressure on local, provincial, and federal governments, there can be a positive effect on the regulation of alternative products?

SMORENBURG: I think so, up to a certain point. I do believe that the pressure needs to continue and strengthen.

Q: What can citizens do to assist in getting these more environmentally friendly products in the Canadian marketplace?

SMORENBURG: Write letters to the MPs and your provincial Ministers of Health, as well as put more pressure on the Federal Minister of Health.

Q: How do you see the role of governments worldwide in the regulation of pesticides?

SMORENBURG: There should be a worldwide organization. There are some real nasty products out there, and there should be some kind of way to regulate these things. There needs to be some kind of sharing of information and technology as well, whether through WHO or some other international organization.

B. Can you make some general recommendations for Canada for changing its pesticide regulations?

SMORENBURG: Implement a low-risk pesticide list of the 30 items that the U.S. has stated on their list. If a low-risk product is approved in one country, it should be approved in all countries. It makes no sense that you have regulations on products like mint and cinnamon. As well, keep getting rid of the high toxic products that are on the market.

Q: I would like to talk more about the research part of all of this. I recently read about a few researchers who were caught accepting money from chemical companies. In your opinion, how can we have a governing body that ensures that researchers are not being paid off by companies?

SMORENBURG: Great question! We've had our own trials and tribulations trying to get researchers for garlic research. They were either booked or were paid a lot more by governments. There are no government funds to support research on alternative products! I see a lot of research money going into other chemicals, but research money for garlic has been impossible. I think the government has to stop funding chemists and instead have these funds go toward more ethical science. Some of the research dollars go to the universities. A university in St. Catharines, Ontario, was using an organic fertilizer on their lawn. Someone found out, and the lawn care person was promptly relieved of his duties. Chemical companies have a lot of power, and that is probably how they also get their research dollars.

Q: How do you feel about an environmental tax that everyone pays and that goes into a fund for alternative research?

SMORENBURG: That's an interesting idea, but I'm not a high-tax kind of guy. If the tax were targeted toward consumption of gasoline or something like that, it could work.

Q: How about 1% of the GST in Canada going to an alternative research fund?

SMORENBURG: Yes, if it is properly applied. We are told taxes will go to one thing, but they tend to end up going somewhere else.

Q: Like the GST? [Chuckles]

SMORENBURG: Exactly.

Q: How do you envision the future of pesticide use in this country? Right now we have some very toxic pesticides out there. Do you see a trend toward nontoxic products for both farmers and consumers?

SMORENBURG: This is in the limbo stage right now. Health Canada is taking a few steps, but has taken four years to get garlic on the market; so, they're not going to move very quickly on other things. The push has to come from the consumer. The government is getting rid of the worst chemicals that are produced and used in Canada. We just have to build the pressure in order to bring in more reduced-risk products.

Q: What role do you think public education should or could have in switching from the use of toxic chemicals to nontoxic chemicals in agriculture and industry?

SMORENBURG: Even if they just took away some of the perks and bribes given to certain chemical and pharmaceutical companies, that would help. They poison you and then give you a pill to fix the problem. It just doesn't make sense. Ontario, for example, has a pretty good awareness of West Nile virus. The officials believe that by cleaning up and getting rid of standing water, this will help with the problem; but then they promote Deet. I'm not sure who pays for them saying these things, but there are alternatives out there. Education is key.

Q: Do you think that the education should also be in the school system?

SMORENBURG: Great idea! The health care system is strapped, and there are cut backs. If you can start by educating children, they can maybe live a more conscious life. As well, they can pressure their parents.

Q: Children have a huge impact on their parents. So, when they can home from school with ideas for composting, recycling and other alternatives, they can really help change the way parents function on a daily basis.

SMORENBURG: That is right and that is also our future. So, we should be educating them this way. We really need to start thinking more about a sustainable environment; otherwise we aren't going to have one at all.

Q: Do you have any plans to import other products into Canada that will challenge the current pesticide control laws?

SMORENBURG: Yes, we are in the midst of that now with a personal repellent. Again, it's been very frustrating. The product has food-grade ingredients in it, and so why should I have to spend \$25,000.00 on testing? It just doesn't make sense! The pay back on that could be years, maybe 5 to 10 years away.

Q: This is an interesting problem, because the government says something is safe to eat but you can't put it on your skin.

SMORENBURG: It's funny because this ingredient is used in cosmetics already. So, it really is nonsensical. It's frustrating, but we are going to push forward with that as well as with an orange-peel extract product. First, however, we are going to get *Mosquito Barrier* out there and make the public aware and interested in it.

Q: Are you manufacturing some of these products yourself?

SMORENBURG: Yes, the personal repellent will be made in Canada. That's our own concoction, but it is far away from being marketed.

Q: What I noticed on your site is that you haven't addressed the hemp industry, and I'm wondering if hemp oil can be used in some of these products.

SMORENBURG: The company Hempola has a personal repellent, and I understand that according to their documentation it works well. Hemp crops are the lowest sprayed crops, because hemp has a natural repellency.

Q: Since you need to mix *Mosquito Barrier* with an oil, wouldn't it be beneficial to mix it with hemp oil?

SMORENBURG: Yes.

Q: The great thing about hemp here in Canada is that we can grow it legally, unlike the U.S. Have you thought about including it in your line for lawn care or household products?

SMORENBURG: Yes, I have. I talked to a gentleman here about a hemp product for lawn care, but he doesn't have the manufacturing capability right now. His processing plant is already up to max. There is a new plant coming up in Manitoba, and I've contacted them.

Q: In Dauphin, Manitoba?

SMORENBURG: Yes. I've contacted them about putting something together. It will be a lawn product. I've used it here in the city, and it has worked great. Just by the sheer nature of hemp and how it is made, it offers a huge opportunity here. I hope the plant comes up to full speed soon.

Q: It is wonderful to hear that people are becoming more creative with this alternative crop. It would be great to see the hemp industry take off in Canada. It could really help the farmers across the country!

SMORENBURG: Yes, I agree. This is an excellent opportunity for Canada.

Q: If you were to make a single suggestion to the Canadian government, what would it be?

SMORENBURG: Some of the research money has to go into alternative products and new and emerging technologies.

Q: And one suggestion to Canadian citizens.

SMORENBURG: Open your eyes! There are alternatives and they work. It will not be instant gratification, but they are safe for us and our environment.