

Gesundheit!

ALTERNATIVES FOR THE ALLERGY SEASON.

By Bobbie Willis

On an evening early last summer, Michael Scarola sat in a lawn chair during a backyard get-together. He seemed steeped in something of a haze, his eyes very red and a little glassy, his mouth the tiniest bit slack. Around him his friends mingled, sipping at beer or pop, munching chips and salsa, discussing the best tactics for building the night's bonfire. "Hey, Michael," someone called. "Can I get you a beer?" Michael blinked a watery-eyed blink, sniffled a futile, stuffed up sniffle, swallowed with some effort and replied, "No thanks – allergy season. Beer just makes it worse."

Where We Live

Here in the Willamette Valley, we're in what we hope is the last stretch of winter — the crocus are starting to sit up, and trees are beginning to bud and bloom. It brings on such a feeling of, "Whew, we made it." But for some people, spring sunshine and warm weather mean only the next round of gray dread: allergy season.

Close to 400,000 acres of land in the Willamette Valley are used to grow 60 percent of the world's cool season grasses and 90 percent of the world's ryegrass (this is according to 1998 statistics, meaning the numbers could be greater now). This results in an enormous amount of spring/summer allergens in the air we breathe (not to mention the pollutants in late summer when field burning takes place). Add to that general tree and plant pollen and the fact that our geographic valley formation makes a perfect funnel for air pollutants to settle into, and springtime in these parts means many people — about 20 percent, in fact — are living with some degree of allergies.

Symptoms May Include

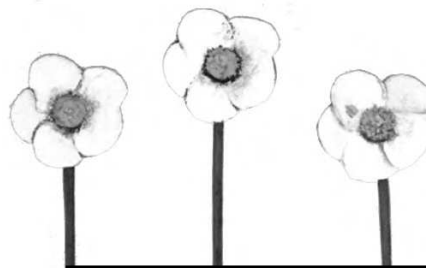
Scarola has called Eugene home since 1975, and every spring and summer for nearly 30 years have brought him six to 12 weeks of severe hay fever funk. "Pretty stupid, right?" he says. "I must be, like, the eternal optimist" hoping every year that the allergy symptoms will ebb a little.

But it's always the same: "I know it's coming in May," Scarola says. His eyes start to get itchy, the nasal congestion sets

in. "The first three weeks in June are the worst," he says. His nose runs "like a ... faucet — everything's a Kleenex that time of year." At the height of the season, Scarola can count on a month of excruciatingly itchy and burning eyes, nasal congestion, runny nose, and hypersensitive skin. Symptoms have, on occasion, reached extremes, with skin breaking out in hives, and one severe allergy attack requiring a shot of adrenaline (epinephrine) to control it. Scarola wears sunglasses during allergy season, even at night, to help protect his eyes, and the nasal congestion makes for restless nights where he sometimes has to sleep sitting up for any chance of breathing.

Scarola's wife, Rebecca (not an allergy

Michael Scarola, chronic hay fever sufferer.



sufferer herself, but whose June 21 birthday, incidentally, coincides with the first day of summer and the very highest pitch of Scarola's hay fever), says, "It's really kind of a bummer. It's the time of year when you want to be outside gardening or riding your bike, and Michael's just miserable. He's a good sport about it, though. We've kind of learned to just get ready ..." Getting ready means plugging in the air conditioner and closing the house up as much as possible to create a place where Scarola can keep away from the pollen outside.

Options for Treatment

For a town its size, Eugene has a pretty broad range of treatment options for allergy sufferers. One interesting option is to treat the sufferer's immediate environment

rather than treating the symptoms themselves. Dan Stih, who runs Healthy Living Spaces (www.hlspace.com), works as a certified environmental inspector, and says of the Scarolas' efforts to seal up the house, "That could make it worse. If the air and environment inside is no good, you're basically locking yourself inside with the bad stuff."

Stih evaluates how home and living spaces may be contributing to any number of allergy symptoms and suffering. He works with clients to determine overall cleanliness and health of the living space, as well as to evaluate air quality. Stih explains that a range of things in the home — from vinyl building materials to formaldehyde to natural gas leaks to hidden mold — can cause any number of severe health problems for people. After evaluating a home, suggesting improve-

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