



The Chatterbox

Treasures and trash in the mailbox

BY BETTY KAISER
For the Sentinel

Going to the mailbox used to be one of life's pleasures. In a more personal and un-computerized society, we corresponded across town and around the world with pen and paper. Telephone calls were expensive, but postage stamps were not. A treasured note from someone saying 'hello' was usually tucked in among the inevitable bills. Those cards, notes and letters always made my day.

Today, just about the only people saying 'hello' to me by snail mail are not people at all. The mailers are automated computers deep in the bowels of marketing offices all across the nation. There, clever ad agencies put together enticing, colorful offers that are mass mailed to millions of people. At my house they go right in the trash/recycling.

This past year our mailbox has been bombarded with a ridiculous amount of unwanted catalogs, coupons, credit card offers and donation requests. Some charities send one or two solicitations a week. Many add stamps and coins to entice a donation. They are seldom opened. In an effort to stop the flow, I tried marking them "return to sender." It made things worse and they keep coming.

One day I couldn't stand it any longer. I opened a solicitation and found a phone number to call and (hopefully) stop the onslaught. I was told they would be happy to do so but "Mrs. Kaiser, you must understand that these mailings are prepared months in advance and will take up to 12 weeks to stop." I hung up before I said something that I shouldn't.

Eventually, the mailings dwindled down to once-a-week communications. As I stand over the trashcan, slicing and dicing them, I no longer wonder what some banking institutions are doing with our money. I know. They're spending it on soliciting more customers and keeping the post office in business.

I am an avid magazine subscriber,

and thanks to some very nice 'two-years-for-the-price-of-one' offers, I often get good deals. Especially nice are the 'buy-one-give-one' gift offers. Obviously (as you will see) these are cash-flow bonanzas for the companies and cash cows for the long haul.

A couple of years ago I noticed that the due dates for my Reader's Digest magazine subscriptions were coming closer and closer together. December bills for family gift subscriptions were arriving in July. When I didn't pay them, the bills kept coming. So I decided the subscriptions must be expired and wrote a check. The next year I did the same thing.

Guess what? By the time that I caught on to their advance billing game, everyone still had two years left on subscriptions. I finally called Customer Service and got it all straightened out. Now I keep a list of expiration dates.

"Final Notice!" offers without an actual expiration date are common. An offer to renew my three-year AARP membership was really annoying. My membership was only one year old when I received a notice to confirm that I wanted to renew my AARP membership and receive a free travel bag! I called and complained that the offer was deceptive and they apologized. Yeah, right.

Of course, these solicitations are not just limited to snail mail. Oh, no. They also come via telephone (email spam is another subject).

Last winter, in one of March's wild winter storms, our power was out about 24 hours. As soon as our telephone service was restored, the phone rang. The caller inquired if everyone was okay and if we were interested in purchasing a Personal Emergency Response System (PERS) in case this happens again. In a different state of mind and a different time, I might have been cordial. Instead, I just told him to remove our name from his calling list and hung up.

My husband has a product in his workshop for which he purchases parts on the telephone. When he needs something, he calls and orders it. If he

doesn't need anything, he doesn't call. The problem is that if he doesn't call every 30 days, they call him — night after night at dinnertime. He asked to speak to their supervisor and be removed from their call list. They agreed, but still the calls came.

Finally, I got online and ferreted out email addresses for the corporate office customer service division. A distinctly worded message protesting their sales tactics resulted in corporate calling me. They assured me that the sales solicitations would stop. And they did.

Still, in spite of our enrollment in the "Do not call" program, the other calls continued. So, we threw in the towel and subscribed to our phone company's feature that blocks unwanted calls. For a small fee its message annoys everyone who calls—but it does what we pay for—a great job of filtering out solicitors and scam artists!

In a last-ditch effort to opt out of the trash mail offers that kept coming, I Googled for some help. I started with <http://www.usa.gov/topics/family/privacy-protection/junk-mail.shtml>. Their site suggests that we tell the companies directly to remove our name (an on-going chore) or call the credit reporting agencies notification system at 1-888-567-8688. This required giving one's Social Security number.

A final suggestion was to visit the Direct Marketing Association's website at: https://www.optoutprescreen.com/opt_form.cgi

I decided to sign up with this one even though it doesn't get rave reviews and must be renewed every three years (without an expiration notice). It was quick and simple and hopefully it will work.

Now, if I could just get friends and family to fill the mailbox with handwritten treasured notes—I would be a happy girl!

Betty Kaiser's Chatterbox is about people, places, family, and other matters of the heart. Contact her at 942-1317 or via e-mail — bchatty@bettykaiser.com

Snakes slither through the garden annihilating pests

BY KYM POKORNY
OSU Extension Service

Gardeners should be glad to see snakes glide through the garden. These much-maligned reptiles consume garden pests, including slugs, grubs, mice, voles and rats.

"The vast majority of snakes in Oregon are very beneficial," said Bob Mason, a professor of integrative biology at Oregon State University who specializes in snakes.

Snakes eat a variety of pests. The garter feeds on slugs; the sharp-tailed snake adds grubs to their diet, including the destructive Japanese beetle grub. Rubber boas specialize in eating mice and voles, going down their tunnels after them. And gopher snakes snack on mice and rats.

"I've even had farmers call me up and ask if I had any snakes available," Mason said.

Garters are the type of snake most often seen by urban and suburban gardeners, he said. Two species of garter snakes are commonly found throughout much of Oregon, except the mountains: the abundant western terrestrial garter snake and the common garter snake. In western Oregon, a third species is also present, the northwestern garter snake. An aquatic garter snake resides in southwestern Oregon.

Garter snakes generally breed in the spring and give birth to live young in the late summer or fall. Often, young are not seen until the following spring, after they emerge from hibernation after their first winter.

"Most young garter snakes don't survive into adulthood," Mason said. "They are killed off by predators, cars and lawnmowers."

To make your property garter snake friendly, Mason advises:

Walk your lawn before you mow it to scare the snakes into hiding. Lawn

mowers are deadly to snakes because they can't hear like we do. Rather, they feel vibrations.

Provide habitat for snakes if you have room. Old plywood or corrugated metal roofing left loosely on the ground in an out-of-the-way place on your property provides hiding and nesting places for slithering creatures. Old stumps and large rocks also make good snake habitat.

Don't use chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers, in areas used by snakes, including lawns.

If you have pets, the likelihood of attracting snakes is minimal.

The western rattlesnake, the only species of truly venomous snake native to Oregon, feeds on mice, rats and other smaller animals. Rattlesnakes were once more commonly found on both the west and east sides of the Cascades, however they've largely been killed off on the west side, Mason said.

"Rattlers are rare in northwestern Oregon," he said. "They were shot out 100 years ago by early settlers. There are a few dens left, but only in really isolated places."

In southern and eastern Oregon, however, rattlers are more common.

"Rattlesnakes are part of the natural environment," he said. "They should be respected. When you encounter one in its natural environment, away from homes and children, stay away and leave the snake alone. They are quite reclusive and rarely aggressive."

Learn more about snakes from the Extension publications Common Garter Snake and Attract Reptiles and Amphibians to Your Yard. Mason also recommends the photo-illustrated book, "Reptiles of Washington and Oregon," published by the Seattle Audubon Society and edited by Robert M. Storm and William P. Leonard.

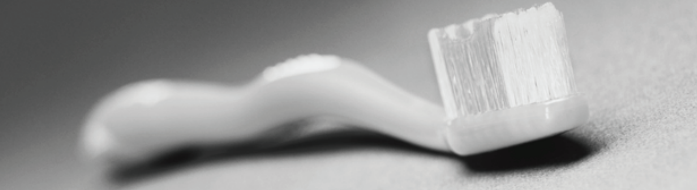
Walk will raise funds for sensory gym for students with disabilities

The A Team Justice League, a group of parents and caregivers who have children with special needs, is planning its first annual Walk for Awareness on Sunday, March 29 from 1-3 p.m. The walk starts and ends in Alton Baker Park in Eugene. The event

is planned as a fundraiser to build a sensory gym for children with special needs, which would aim to provide stimulation to all of a child's senses using special therapeutic equipment. The group's website can be viewed at www.ateamjustice.org.

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