

# Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

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**Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture** is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to [kemeryr7@frontier.com](mailto:kemeryr7@frontier.com).

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## Bluebirds

Some material compiled and revised from Wild Birds Unlimited, the Audubon Society, and National Geographic



In the past week or so, I have noticed a group of bluebirds at my feeder. As you can see from the picture, I had “leftover” mealworms that were placed in a plastic container that contained delicious blueberry cheesecake consumed early last year. The mealworms were placed in the container last spring in an effort to attract orioles.

As it turns out, the Orioles ignored the mealworms – instead attracted to the oranges and nectar at another feeder. The mealworms - advertised as tasty, satisfying, and delicious – remained in this feeder from June until this January.

They were intact, but a sodden mess. The Bluebirds obviously thought they were delicious (picture to left) – though not as delicious and satisfying as the cheesecake was to me.

Looking through various resources, I discovered that Bluebirds normally arrive in northwestern Indiana around March or April. This year, the first bluebird sighted was at Mengerson Woods on December 28, 2021.

Do the Bluebirds know something? Has climate change played a role? Were they guided by ultrasonic communication from a 5G tower – or UFO's from Alpha Centauri? Only time will tell.

Eastern Bluebirds are found throughout the Eastern U.S. and migrate from the southern U.S. to the north each year. Bluebirds in the past were quite rare but have made an incredible come back due to thousands of bluebird nest boxes being installed across the country.

Nesting occurs from March through August. Only the female incubates the 4-6 eggs which she maintains at a temperature of 98 to 100°F.

Bluebirds may raise two and sometimes three broods per season. Pairs may build their second nests on top of the first nest, or they may nest in an entirely new site. The male continues to take care of the recently fledged young while the female begins to re-nest. Young of the first brood will occasionally help raise their siblings in the second brood. Bluebirds are generally monogamous, staying together throughout the breeding season, and may breed

together for more than one season. However, some birds may switch mates during a breeding season to raise a second brood. Some folks say that variety is the “spice of life”. Some female Bluebirds evidently feel the same.

Both sexes defend territories; however, the males tend to defend territory edges while the females primarily defend the nest site.

Males may carry nest material to the nest, but they do not participate in the actual building. They spend much time guarding their mates during this time to prevent them from mating with other males. Wow! Bluebird romance is more complex than I thought.

Adult Bluebirds tend to return to the same breeding territory year after year, but only a small percentage (three to five percent) of young birds return to where they hatched.

Bluebirds love mealworms and can be drawn in with a small dish filled with mealworms. – especially if the dishes were used for blueberry cheesecake.

70% of all Bluebirds die before reaching their first birthday. Most adult Bluebirds live for only a few years, while a small number live up to four or five years.

A bluebird can spot caterpillars and insects in tall grass at the remarkable distance of over 50 yards. Bluebirds feed on a wide variety of insects, including crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, and many others; also, spiders, earthworms, snails, rarely small lizards, or tree frogs.

Bluebird females of all species have duller plumage than males; this may reduce their visibility to predators.

Bluebirds have no blue pigments in their feathers. Instead, each feather barb has a thin layer of cells that absorb all wavelengths of color except blue. Only the blue wavelength is reflected and scattered, resulting in their blue appearance to our eyes.

Bluebirds consume about 4 grams of food per day, or about 12% of their body weight. This is equivalent to a two-hundred-pound human eating 24 pounds of food each day.

Unpaired male Bluebirds may sing up to 1,000 songs per hour but average a more reasonable rate of four to five hundred songs per hour. Bluebirds can fly at speeds up to 45 miles per hour if necessary.

Bluebirds raise their young in old or pre-existing nesting cavities and have a nesting success rate of about 60%. Northern Flickers and Hairy, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers all produce nesting cavities suitable for later use by Bluebirds. When choosing natural nesting cavities, studies have shown that Eastern Bluebirds select abandoned woodpecker nests at least 75% of the time. If you make or purchase a bluebird house, make sure that it has a round entrance hole that is exactly 1 1/2 inches in diameter. If the hole is too small, bluebirds won't be able to enter the nest box. But, if the entrance hole is too large, it may allow European Starlings to enter, which are an invasive species that compete heavily with bluebirds for nesting sites.

They cannot build nests in trees like robins, cardinals, or many other birds.

At a bird feeder, bluebirds enjoy live mealworms, especially during the summer when insects make up the majority of their diet. You can also attract bluebirds to your feeder with sunflower seed hearts, berries, pieces of fruit, chopped peanuts, and peanut butter. Bluebirds are “not sorry” about eating peanut butter.



# New Vegetables

The following are “new” vegetables listed in the 2022 Totally Tomatoes” catalog. Sometimes the names intrigue, or where they are from, or some unique characteristic. There are more new introductions this year as I previously reported last issue. It appears as if one trend is to produce determinate tomatoes that produce earlier in more compact patio plants. Determinate varieties are generally used more for canning, as the growth of the plant is determined – unlike indeterminate tomatoes which grow taller and taller all year.



## Bellatrix Hybrid Tomato

65-70 days. Bright red Roma/paste-type tomatoes grow up to 3" long by 2 1/4" wide. Fruits ripen in a short period of time, allowing for a large harvest over the season. Excellent for sauces and salsas. Great for growing in containers. Plants are highly resistant to Tomato Mosaic Virus. Determinate.

## Aleppo Pepper

Attractive, thin-walled fruits grow 4 to 6" long, are mostly 3-lobed and ripen from green to rich red to burgundy. Moderately hot with about 10,000 Scoville units and has a nice smoky flavor. Fruits can also be enjoyed fresh - flavor is sweet with a kick of heat. Grown in Aleppo, Syria for centuries where it was traditionally used for drying and crushing into pepper flakes or grinding into powder. Very productive plants can grow 3 to 4 ft. tall.



## DePurple Hybrid Cauliflower

Add a unique color to meals and veggie trays with this attractive lavender-pink variety. Heads grow 7 1/2 to 8" and have contrasting white stems. Flavor is excellent and the color holds when cooked. Uniform heads are dense and dome-shaped with tight curds. Wrapper leaves provide good protection. Plants are widely adaptable. Ideal for both spring and fall planting.



## Armageddon Hybrid Pepper

The world's first hybrid super-hot chili with a Scoville rating of 1.3 million! Pale green, pendant shaped fruits grow up to 2" by 1 1/2", have a small tip/tail and mature to bright red. Features improved plant vigor, fruit uniformity and less days to maturity over open-pollinated varieties. Vigorous, uniform, and early fruiting with exceptional yields.



## Heartbreaker Twiggy Orange Hybrid Tomato

Fruits grow in clusters, weigh approx. 1/4 oz. each and are about the size of a nickel. Ideal pot size is 5 to 6". Mature plants grow to just 12" tall. Determinate







## The Gardening “Legacy” of Jerry Baker - America’s Master Gardener

Jerry Baker, America’s Master Gardener®, passed away peacefully in his sleep in March 2017. His “legacy” continues through a business and website by the same name.

Jerry Baker was never trained as a Master Gardener, but he trademarked the name before Universities – who trained actual Master Gardener volunteers – thought about protecting the title “Master Gardener”.

This is how a former undercover cop in Detroit, Michigan, posing as a gardener, tree trimmer, landscaper, and seed salesman ended up creating a multi-million-dollar business empire. He has written a multitude of books, videos – appeared on countless talk shows, and was a PBS “expert” – assisting their fundraising efforts – with no formal Horticulture education at all.

Many of his homegrown “recipes” for lawn and garden care have no research behind their use, and many are dangerous to plants and people – or do no good at all.

Following are but a few examples of his recipes.

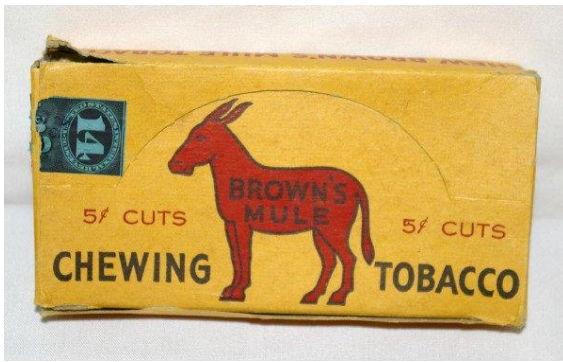
**ANTISEPTIC MOUTHWASH** does the same thing in your garden that it does in your mouth. Yep, it actually destroys those nasty germs that cause big-time trouble if you don't get after them. But don't waste your money buying fancy flavored mouthwash for your tonics. The plain stuff works just fine, and your plants won't mind having "medicine breath"! *Ricky’s comments – There is no evidence that mouthwash kills plant diseases – in fact research has shown the alcohol the mouthwash contains actually damages plants.*

**BABY SHAMPOO** and **DISHWASHING LIQUID** help to soften the soil and remove dust, dirt, and pollution from leaves, so important functions like photosynthesis can take place more easily. These simple soaps make other sprays stick to leaves better, too. And bugs hate the taste (especially of the lemon-scented types), so they head for the hills in a hurry! Just make sure you never substitute detergent for these soaps, and in particular, don't use antibacterial detergent, because it can damage your plants. *Ricky’s Comments: It is true that dish soaps can kill insects on plants – too much can damage plants. Actually, antibacterial soaps are used by some Universities in their greenhouses to control pests – the University of Florida being one.*

**CRITTERS** Try mixing coffee grounds, cayenne pepper, and/or orange peels into the top layer of soil, or try one of repellents I have in my book, *Backyard Problem Solver*. You can also stuff dried rue leaves, mothballs, or dry borax soap placed in the toe of old nylon stockings and hang them in various areas of your garden. *Ricky’s Comments: It is against the law and very toxic to use cancer-causing mothballs in a garden or in the home.*

**BEER** serves as an enzyme activator to help release the nutrients that are locked in the soil and puts 'em' to work making your plants grow stronger, healthier, and better able to nip any problems in the bud. It also wakes up and





energizes organic activity. Foreign or domestic, stale or freshly opened--whatever you have on hand will work just fine. *Ricky's Comments: Actual research has shown that beer does nothing to help plants grow and again the alcohol can inhibit plant growth.*

CORN SYRUP and MOLASSES stimulate chlorophyll production in plants, and they help to feed the good soil bacteria, too. I'll bet you didn't know that your garden has a sweet tooth, did you? *Ricky's Comments: Even though plants make and use sugar – the sugars found in corn and molasses do not help plants stimulate*

*chlorophyll production - Only sunlight and adequate water can “stimulate” production of sugar that a plant makes -itself- with no additional help. . Beneficial soil bacterial is not dependent on sugar – compost is the best way to enhance good soil bacteria.*

**GARDEN PESTS** Take a plug or wad of chewing tobacco (which can be purchased at most grocery stores), stick it in a nylon stocking, and boil it. You'll end up with a fragrant dark brown juice containing loads of nicotine and other natural chemicals that function as broad-spectrum insecticides. But that's not all there is to this solution: it needs a bit more to make it truly effective. As with most natural insecticide mixes, you'll need to mix it into a soapy base to get it to stick to the plants. So make yourself a Fels Naphtha Soap solution by boiling a whole bar in a stocking, and mix that with two cups of tobacco juice and one cup of any antiseptic mouthwash. The mouthwash will irritate and/or desiccate any bugs that try to chow down on your plants. *Ricky's Comments: This mix can be dangerous for folks who spray it – especially non-smokers – because concentrated nicotine is a deadly poison – In addition tobacco can harbor tobacco mosaic virus which can damage or kill tomato plants.*

Unfortunately, these recipes still persist – now in the virtual world – and feed into gardeners' desire to find a cheap homemade product that is not a conventional pesticide. These homemade products also feed into the distrust many folks have for any recommendation made from experts and agencies associated with “traditional” sources of information such as government agencies like the FDA, EPA, or even sources such as Cooperative Extension.

I tried to warn administration in Extension 15 years ago about the growing distrust from the public about their recommendations and programs. They - like many experts – were skeptical about organic gardening- and have promoted farming methods of industrial agriculture/horticulture using conventional pesticides, fertilizers, confined feeding operations (CAFOs) and genetically-modified (GMO) crops. Many publications were and continue to be outdated, and many Extension Specialists continue to promote conventional pesticides over organic alternatives. It is no wonder folks don't trust them anymore when one looks at the health and environmental consequences of policies that insist that information only comes from their own publications that for the most part ignore these issues important to citizens.

It is difficult to trust any information nowadays – now gardeners must try to fact check all information and products before applying them to their own garden practices. Jerry Baker was one of the first to promote home remedies that were an alternative to conventional dogma, Nowadays, the Internet and social media is filled with folks trying to promote gardening methods and products that are either unsafe, or they don't work.

It is sad that folks trust these resources more than agencies that are supposed to meet the needs of people and their well-being and safety.



## How Crisco Made Americans Believers in Industrial Food

revised article from Helen Zoe Veit, Associate Professor of History, Michigan State University -

Perhaps you'll unearth a can of Crisco for the holiday baking season. If so, you'll be one of millions of Americans who have, for generations, used it to make cookies, cakes, pie crusts and more. But for all Crisco's popularity, what exactly is that thick, white substance in the can?

If you're not sure, you're not alone. For decades, Crisco had only one ingredient, cottonseed oil. But most consumers never knew that.

A century ago, Crisco's marketers pioneered revolutionary advertising techniques that encouraged consumers not to worry about ingredients and instead to put their trust in reliable brands. It was a successful strategy that other companies would eventually copy.

For most of the 19th century, cotton seeds were a nuisance. When cotton gins combed the South's ballooning cotton harvests to produce clean fiber, they left mountains of seeds behind. Early attempts to mill those seeds resulted in oil that was unappealingly dark and smelly. Many farmers just let their piles of cottonseed rot. It was only after a chemist named David Wesson pioneered industrial bleaching and deodorizing techniques in the late 19th century that cottonseed oil became clear, tasteless and neutral smelling enough to appeal to consumers. Soon, companies were selling cottonseed oil by itself as a liquid or mixing it with animal fats to make cheap, solid shortenings, sold in pails to resemble lard.

Shortening's main rival was lard. Earlier generations of Americans had produced lard at home after autumn pig slaughters, but by the late 19th century meat processing companies were making lard on an industrial scale. Lard had a noticeable pork taste, but there's not much evidence that 19th-century Americans objected to it, even in cakes and pies. Instead, its issue was cost. While lard prices stayed relatively high through the early 20th century, cottonseed oil was abundant and cheap. Early cottonseed oil and shortening companies went out of their way to highlight their connection to cotton. They touted the transformation of cottonseed from pesky leftover to useful consumer product as a mark of ingenuity and progress. Brands like Cottolene and Cotosuet drew attention to cotton with their names and by incorporating images of cotton in their advertising.

When Crisco launched in 1911, it did things differently. Like other brands, it was made from cottonseed. But it was also a new kind of fat – the world's first solid shortening made entirely from a once-liquid plant oil. Crisco used a brand-new process called hydrogenation, which Procter & Gamble, the creator of Crisco, had perfected after years of research and development.

From the beginning, the company's marketers talked a lot about the marvels of hydrogenation – what they called “the Crisco process” – but avoided any mention of cottonseed. Crisco was made from “100% shortening,” and “Crisco is Crisco, and nothing else.” Crisco was “strictly vegetable,” “purely vegetable” or “absolutely all vegetable.”

Cottonseed had a mixed reputation, and it was only getting worse by the time Crisco launched. A handful of unscrupulous companies were secretly using cheap cottonseed oil to cut costly olive oil, so some consumers thought of it as an adulterant. Others associated cottonseed oil with soap or with its emerging industrial uses in dyes, roofing tar and explosives. Still others read alarming headlines about how cottonseed meal contained a toxic compound, even though cottonseed oil itself contained none of it.



Instead of dwelling on its problematic sole ingredient, Crisco's marketers kept consumer focus trained on brand reliability and the purity of modern factory food processing. Crisco flew off the shelves. Unlike lard, Crisco had a neutral taste. Unlike butter, Crisco could last for years on the shelf. Unlike olive oil, it had a high smoking temperature for frying. In just five years, Americans were annually buying more than 60 million cans of Crisco, the equivalent of three cans for every family in the country. Within a generation, lard went from being a major part of American diets to an old-fashioned ingredient.

Today, Crisco has replaced cottonseed oil with palm, soy and canola oils. But cottonseed oil is still one of the most widely consumed edible oils in the country. It's a routine ingredient in processed foods, and it's commonplace in restaurant fryers.

Crisco would have never become a juggernaut without its aggressive advertising campaigns that stressed the purity and modernity of factory production and the reliability of the Crisco name. In the wake of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act – which made it illegal to adulterate or mislabel food products – Crisco helped convince Americans that they didn't need to understand the ingredients in processed foods, as long as those foods came from a trusted brand.

In the decades that followed Crisco's launch, other companies followed its lead, introducing products like Spam, Cheetos and Froot Loops with little or no reference to their ingredients. Early packaging for Cheetos simply advertised the snack as 'cheese flavored puffs.'

Once ingredient labeling was mandated in the U.S. in the late 1960s, the multisyllabic ingredients in many highly processed foods may have mystified consumers. But for the most part, they kept on eating.

So, if you don't find it strange to eat foods whose ingredients you don't know or understand, you have Crisco partly to thank.

## New Vegetables - Johnny's Seed many organic selections are called "new" when they are not new varieties at all



**Captain Lucky** an heirloom-like green bicolor with incredible flavor. Beefy, 10–16 oz. fruit with gorgeous internal color — green and yellow with streaks of bright red and pink. Fruits are clean, dense, and have a silky-smooth texture. Open habit, potato-leaf plants. Bred in North Carolina by independent breeder Millard Murdock. Indeterminate. So ..is it an heirloom? Or just heirloom like? Hmmm.... Great name though.

**Red, Amber** First-ever organic triploid. Blocky oval, seedless watermelon with crisp, bright red flesh running all the way to the rind! The heavy, medium-large fruits can weigh 14–20 lb., depending on spacing and weather conditions. Avg. 1–2 fruits/plant. USDA Certified Organic.



# Your Cat Could Burn your House Down Revised from Associated Press article



South Korean officials have a message for pet owners in Seoul: Beware, your cat might burn your house down.

The warning comes as the capital's Metropolitan Fire & Disaster Headquarters estimated that more than 100 fires over the last three years were started by cats, many of which managed to turn on electric stoves with their furry little paws. "Cat-started fires are continuing to be reported these days," Chung Gyo-chul, an official working at the department told the Korea Herald. "We advise pet owners to pay extra attention as fire could spread widely when no one is at home." Over half of the fires recorded were started when the owners were out of the house, officials said.

Fire-starting pets are not just a problem in South Korea: In the United States, almost 1,000 home fires each year are started by pets, according to the National Fire Protection Association, although it remains unclear what percentage of these blazes were started by cats. My guess - a lot.

The American Kennel Club and ADT Security Services advise people to ensure their pet is unable to access appliances when left home alone, recommending the use of gates and crates to contain mischievous animals. Experts also recommend removing stove knobs or using protective covers to prevent fires at home. **Note:** There is no gate or crate that can stop a cat – and they will find a set of pliers to turn the knobs.

But cats aren't the only animals that have sent firefighters running to family homes. On Christmas Day 2019, a 45-year-old tortoise in Essex, England, knocked a heat lamp onto its bedding and started a fire while its owners were out of the house. As thick smoke rose, neighbors in the town of Great Dunmow made calls to the emergency services who attended the scene and extinguished the flames.

The full identity of the unnamed tortoise was never uncovered, but Essex County Fire and Rescue Service described the creature as "angry" looking.

That same month, and also in the county of Essex, a dog that had been left home alone started a house fire by turning on the microwave, which happened to have some bread stored inside.

The moral of this story? Cats cannot be trusted and never allow an "angry" tortoise inside the home.

## New GMO Labeling Rules (Remember when I discussed distrust of government agencies?)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) changed its labeling rules for genetically modified foods in the new year, and critics say the new move adds work for consumers and creates large loopholes for suppliers.

Foods containing "genetically engineered" (GE) ingredients or "genetically modified organisms" (GMOs) will now simply be marked as "bioengineered"

A phone number or QR code on the packaging may also direct consumers to more information, a decision some argue discriminates against people without access to a cell phone or smartphone.



The USDA has said the change "avoids a patchwork of state labeling regulations" to provide a national standard for the labels that were once set on a state-by-state basis. But critics say the term could create confusion among consumers. The Center for Food Safety has also criticized the rules, saying it will leave the majority of genetically modified foods unlabeled. Mistrust? Government agencies – Anyone? Anyone?

## Greensand *amended from The Spruce*

While it sounds revolutionary, greensand is nothing new. It's been around for decades and is a popular tool that organic gardeners turn to often to fertilize their soil.

Greensand is an organic fertilizer that contains mineral deposits from the ocean floor. Great Britain and Brazil have greensand deposits above-ground (that were evidently once underwater) that are mined for this product. Greensand for gardening use has been around for quite a while. I remember mention of it in old *Mother Earth* and *Organic Gardening* magazines.

There are benefits to using greensand in your garden and lawn. It can enhance soil structure, increase root growth, and is good for the overall health of plants because it gives them more slow-release nutrients. Greensand is also a useful component of container garden soils and seed starting mixes.

Another name for greensand is "glaucanite". It has a bluish-green color and is made of marine potash, silica, iron oxide, magnesia, lime, phosphoric acid, and about 30 other trace minerals.

It is a good organic source of potash, which is important for overall plant health and disease resistance. Potash is also very important in how the stomates - the tiny openings in plant leaves – work efficiently to control the plants overall drought resistance.

Gardeners also find greensand useful when trying to improve hard clay soil. It will help texturize it and naturally boost the nutrient content. Sandy soils can also benefit from greensand because it may increase the moisture retention capacity. I am not exactly sure that "texturize" is a word one could use in Scrabble.

It is perfectly safe to touch greensand when working with it and it is not toxic to humans or animals. If you have pets or children outside near your plants, you will not have to worry about exposing them to dangerous toxins.

Greensand will not harm all of the important microorganisms and worms in your garden soil - unlike conventional fertilizer. Greensand is not water-soluble, so it has to degrade over time when applied to the soil. It does not have to be "watered in" like other products. It is best when applied in early spring. The amount needed will depend on where and how you want to use it.

### Greensand Uses and Amounts

Plants and trees: Mix two cups of greensand into the soil around individual plants and trees.

Broadcast application: Use between 50 and 100 pounds for every 1,000 feet of soil treated.



Lawns: The general recommendation is to apply 16 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

Flower and vegetable gardens: 30 - 60 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

Bushes: Add 1/3 cup per bush when planting or fertilizing.

Potting mix: Mix in two tablespoons per gallon of potting mix for container gardens and houseplants.

**Ricky's Notes:** One issue I have with greensand is how expensive it is. A 30-pound bag of Greensand (about the amount needed to treat a 500 to 1,000 square foot garden) will cost you around \$60.00.

## A Few Garden Trends 2022

**Japandi** - Japandi design has already cast its tranquil spell across our home interiors, but it's set to be a big trend for our gardens in 2022. This design style combines clean Scandinavian functionality with soothing Japanese minimalism, and it delivers uncluttered, calming simplicity. Master this comforting blend of function and form by prioritizing natural materials, pared-back coloring, and high-quality furnishings. Water is a key element. Feng Shui meets Nordic minimalism – this seems rather contrived, doesn't it? Plus - what about some of us that prefer low-quality cheap furnishings?



**Outdoor office** - Experts think half of all 'knowledge workers' will be working remotely, which means home offices are likely going to be the norm for the foreseeable future. But if you don't have the space to sacrifice indoors, why not construct an outdoor office? A specially built backyard office is the perfect option for those with the space, plus it creates a more separate work area to help reinforce a good work-life balance. **Ricky's thoughts:** Better have a sign that says "No Kids Allowed" – Ever! Also: Not everyone - even "knowledge workers" – or even "non-knowledge" workers might have the resources to build an entire home office in the backyard.

**Pocket gardening** - This new trend combines living walls and stacked pockets, often made from recycled plastics, or felt, that are filled with lush vegetation that spills out in a rugged natural display. It could take some time to water the "rugged display"



## Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

**To my caregiver:** *Ok, I signed your ridiculous contract that states: "I Hoggles, your beloved feline, have not ever or will in the future – purposely start any housefire using any kitchen appliance" There .... I hope you're happy.....*

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