

The killer in the garden

Thursday, 14 February 2008 Print | Close

Pot death risk: The killer in the garden

By Alysia Ferguson

IF someone had told John Carter two months ago a bag of potting mix would almost cost him his life, he would have probably laughed and said pull the other one. But a six-and-a-half week stint in hospital knocked down with legionnaire's disease soon had John whistling a different tune.

A new bag of potting mix innocently opened one Saturday last November saw John come within an inch of his life. "Who would have thought when I opened that bag that I would have nearly died," he told The Leader. "I don't remember much of what happened in the weeks after, but I do remember opening that bag of potting mix."

John contracted the rare infection of the lungs caused by bacteria of the legionella family known as legionella longbeachae, found in contaminated soil or potting mix. However, because the time between exposure to the bacteria and becoming sick is between two and ten days, it was more than a week before John was admitted to hospital. "I opened the potting mix on the Saturday and I remember not feeling very well on the following Thursday," he said. "My memory is virtually gone from after that but my daughter Janelle tells me I took the Friday off work. "The family came over that weekend and apparently they told me I didn't look well and wanted to take me to hospital but I told them I was just run down. The next day, and this is the scary part, I drove to work. I don't remember anything about it but the boys here at work tell me I drove up the driveway erratically, narrowly missed another vehicle and parked in the garden. When I got out of the car I was wearing jeans and a shirt, not my uniform – which was very unlike me – and they knew something was wrong and called an ambulance."

John was taken to Tamworth Hospital where emergency staff quickly realised he was seriously ill. Placed in ICU, doctors were unable to diagnose what was wrong with John and he was placed in an induced coma while cultures were sent to John Hunter Hospital.

"By Wednesday, things were looking pretty bad – my lung collapsed and my daughter asked the doctors what was going on," John said. "She was told I had a 50/50 chance and the next 24 hours were critical as they still didn't know what was wrong with me. Finally word came from John Hunter that I had legionnaires' pneumonia and the doctors started hitting me with the antibiotics straight away."

Within 24 hours John had stabilised but it was still several days before John could speak. He said his memory of most of his time in hospital was erased and he had little idea why he was even in hospital.

"The doctor asked me where I was and I told him it looked like a hospital but I

The killer in the garden

didn't know why because I wasn't sick," he said. "When they told me all that had happened and how close I came to dying, I cracked."

Legionnaire's disease is an infection of the lungs and causes headache, fever, chills, a cough and shortness of breath which can take months to recover from. John spent six and a half weeks in hospital and while he's now back at work, he said the effects of his illness were still being felt. "I'm still short of breath and my limbs are weak," he said. "I find it hard to concentrate for long periods of time and when I was in hospital it would take me two attempts to read the paper. "I would hate to see anyone else get it – it's a terrible, terrible thing to have. "The doctor said while I was very unlucky to get it, I'm doubly lucky to be getting over it." John said it was his daughter Janelle who realised the potting mix was the most likely cause. "She jumped on the computer as soon as she found out what it was and did all the research and it came down to that bag of potting mix," he said. "I never realised and everyone I have spoken to has said the same, that you could get this disease from potting mix. There are warnings on the bags about using face masks and gloves but who ever reads them? I know I didn't." And while for many, a bout of legionnaire's disease would be enough to keep them out of the garden, John said he has used the same bag for more potting. "But now I wear a mask and gloves and wash my hands after," he laughed. "But I figure I have been given a second chance at life and I am not going to waste it." John credits his recovery to the doctors and staff at Tamworth Hospital and of course his family and friends.

Copyright © 2008. Rural Press Limited