

Gardening

Biological controls cut down on beetles

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By Pat Leuchtman
leisure Columnist

The Japanese beetles have landed. They are everywhere. I could handpick them, but there are so many, in such inaccessible places. Therefore, instead of using a strong poison insecticide, I have invested in milky spore disease.

Milky spore disease is totally harmless to the soil, beneficial to insects like bees, to earthworms, all plants, animals and humans. It confines its deadly blow to the Japanese beetle and a couple of its cousins.



The disease gets its name because when the Japanese beetle eats it, its blood is affected and turns white, causing the beetle to die. And though the beetle dies, the disease spores remain in the soil so the cycle continues. One application can last as long as seven years. You can apply it anytime except when the ground is frozen, and no extreme weather conditions will kill the disease. I think it's wonderful stuff. The Japanese beetle may not be quite as enthusiastic.

Another biological control is the unpronounceable bacillus thuringiensis, sold under the trade names Thuricide and Dipel. This affects 23 insects including the Colorado

potato beetle, corn borer, cabbage looper, tent caterpillar and gypsy moth. It acts by paralyzing the innards of these insects so they cannot eat and so die. Like the milky spore disease it is not harmful to birds, bees, animals or humans. You can use it in the vegetable garden right up to the day of harvest.

Milky spore disease and Dipel are both available at Agway.

Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home. Not a verse you will hear me sing. I want my garden to be the ladybug's home. What a beloved and helpful bug. Who among us does not know that their diet is purely carnivorous and that they are not interested in our vegetables and flowers at all, only in soft bodied pests like aphids and mealy bugs. She and her larvae will also feed on the eggs and larvae of these pests, hitting them at every point in their life cycle.

Actually a big business has grown out of harvesting and selling ladybugs to gardeners. However, if your garden does not provide them with a lot of delicious pests, they will fly away to more blighted pastures.

One way that I have heard of to keep mail-order ladybugs is to build a screened cage for them, place it in the garden and feed them a wheat mixture for five days before letting them loose.

Wheat, a by-product of the cheese industry, is available from Allen W. Cater, CRS Company, Box 7585, 6043 Hudson Road, St. Paul, Minn. 55119. Mixed with water and sugar, the ladybugs will accept it as a substitute for honeydew, the substance secreted by aphids that ladybugs find so delicious. You can also spray wheat on your garden to attract local lady bugs.



Finally there is the praying mantis. This insect is so voracious that the females have been known to devour the male during the act of mating. They are entirely carnivorous and will not harm your plants. Welcome them if they come into your garden or order egg cases. Each egg case will provide you with anywhere from 50 to 400 mantids.



With luck they will live in your garden and lay their egg cases nearby so that you will have a praying mantis population the following year.

The egg cases are winter hardy so don't worry about setting them out in the cold. I had friends who kept an egg case inside waiting for warm weather. During housecleaning one day it was moved to a sunny window sill where the mantids promptly hatched and the rest of the day was spent chasing them and carrying them gently out to the garden where they could start eating aphids and caterpillars while they are young and cutting insects, and sucking insects like red spiders and thrips when they are older.

There are a variety of ways to get around using poisonous insecticides in the garden; using biological controls is an idea that deserves some consideration. There are other predatory insects and you might want to investigate using a particular insect for a particular problem in your garden.

Mail order insects are available from a variety of companies including the famous seed company, W. Atlee Burpee, Co., P.O. Box 748, Riverside, CA, 92502. □

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