

Wildlife Gardening, part 4

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Well, it is THAT time of year. Yes...it is Japanese Beetle time! You know, this pest is NO TROUBLE AT ALL in Japan, where it belongs. Yet like those pernicious invading plants the Japanese Knotweed, Multiflora Rose, Kudzu and the Garlic Mustard, it was introduced to the United States by accident some decades ago and has adopted a no-holds-barred strategy of continental domination. It has very few natural enemies (see below) and so at this time of year my yard...everyone else's yard too...has THOUSANDS of them.

What do they look like?

Well, in case you are one of the very few people who does not know what I am talking about, here it is:



You will find these beetles chomping through the leaves and flowers of almost every plant in the yard. They love roses, oak-leaved hydrangeas and hollyhocks but can be found on almost anything. Admittedly, on the web sites I cite below, there are helpful hints about plants that they won't eat...but like the famous "deer-resistant plants", the list always seems to omit the types I want to actually **grow**.

Leaves end up 'skeletonized' – just the veins left – and rose buds in particular are devoured before they can open. So what can you do about it? And what has this got to do with wildlife gardening anyhow?

Where do they come from?

The adult beetle has emerged from pupae buried in the ground. They, of course, came from beetle grubs who have been happily munching through the roots of your lawn for months. Alas, the better we keep our lawns, the better the Japanese beetle grubs like it.

What can I do about them?

These beasts are in the wrong place – they were lifted out from the ecology they evolved in and placed in a candy store where plants had never adapted to them and where few natural predators exist. It isn't their fault, but Japanese beetles are too destructive to be left unmolested – however reluctant I am to kill any living thing.

Adults – although you can buy traps, my personal experience is that while they manage to trap a lot of beetles, they also ATTRACT a lot of them – you can see mating beetles clustered all over the tree that you hang the trap from. The general consensus seems to be that unless your whole neighborhood hangs traps, you will merely act as a magnet for the critters.

So, I'm afraid it is down to manual methods. In the early morning or evening, take a container of soapy water (that is, sudsy water with some Dawn or similar dishwashing liquid) and walk around your yard. When you see a beetle – even better when you see a group of them – hold the container underneath the place where they are and lightly tap the beetle with a finger. Once these beetles feel threatened, they drop to the ground – or in this case, they drop into the water, which kills them quickly. The reason why this method does not work in the middle of the day is that by then, the beetles have warmed up and when they feel threatened, they fly away.

This is quite a satisfying exercise, as you get immediate results. Leave the beetles in the soapy water for an hour or so then tip the whole lot onto your compost heap.

What about pesticides? Well, whichever one is recommended, they are not specific to Japanese beetles. Any residues left on plants will kill friendly insects such as bees, butterflies and ladybugs - - which is NOT what we are trying to do in a wildlife-friendly garden.

As for the larvae (grubs) ...well, this is where you have a chance of doing something a little more long-term. There are several “biological weapons” that can be used – natural predators for the beetle that will attack the larvae and breed naturally in the soil to keep the pest population down. Because they are living things themselves, they have to be treated carefully – the good news is that the ones that you can buy seem harmless to beneficial insects and to the environment.

Milky spore – this is a bacterium that you apply to the soil (*Bacillus popilliae*). You can purchase it from Agway, and it must be applied to your ground for two to three years so it can establish a stable population. Use it on a cloudy fall day. Once the bacteria have had a chance to build up to a stable population, they will spread to areas that you haven't treated (cool, yes?). DON'T use pesticides during this time.

Beneficial nematodes – these are tiny worms, which carry a bacterium that infects the beetle grub. There are two types, with the gorgeous names of *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora* and *Heterorhabditis marelatus*. They are obtainable through a web site (<http://nematodary.com/index.htm>) and are dispersed in water before being spread on the lawn.

These helpful animals are very sensitive to the sun, so wash them into the ground in the evening when the sun has gone down – and make sure that the ground is damp before **and** after you have applied them. Also, the soil temperature has to be at least 55 or so for the nematodes to be active.

More information

These are very informative web sites:

http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/housing/japanese-beetle/jbeetle.html

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/2000/2001.html>

<http://nematodary.com/index.htm> (where you can buy those helpful nematodes....)

There are many others, although quite a few are commercial sites selling pesticides.

Feedback

If you have comments (positive or negative!) [let me know](#)

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