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The Organic Gardener

By Henry Homeyer

It's not always easy to be an organic gardener. Even committed organic gardeners sometimes long

to spray herbicide on goutweed or pesky poison ivy. When Japanese beetles or rose chafers arrive in throngs just before your garden party, you may suffer an urge for the good old days — the time before you understood that spraying an insecticide would kill beneficial bugs along with the bad, aggravating your pest problems. But there are also problems that are more easily addressed with organic solutions.

Each winter, the Ecological Landscaping Association (

www.ela

.org) holds a conference and

eco-marketplace where researchers, landscapers, gardeners and environmentalists meet to share knowledge and ideas. This year, one of the presentations I liked best was by Dr. Richard Casagrande of the University of Rhode Island, who spoke on biocontrol of invasive species. He explained that for some problems, organic controls work better than chemical controls.

Casagrande said that when gardeners hear that foreign species of insects have been introduced to help control invasive plants like purple loosestrife, there is a knee-jerk reaction: "Great. And when they've finished eating the loosestrife, what's going to happen next? Will they eat my delphiniums, or my peonies?"

He explained that although people of good will did introduce some evil exotics like kudzu and oriental bittersweet, the process of introducing foreign insects to combat these plants is very tightly controlled. The University of Rhode Island has quarantine labs that are as tightly controlled as the perimeter around the White House.

First, scientists look at how the invasive species performs in its native land. Purple loosestrife came from Europe in the early 1800s, probably in soil used as ballast in ships. But it is not a problem there. Why not? It evolved there, and over time some 120 species of insects learned to love it. Of these, 14

are host-specific, meaning that they don't eat anything else. A few of these insects were brought to quarantine labs to determine if they eat related species of the target plants, or if they would attack any of our major crops, such as corn, wheat and soy.

If you've ever tried to dig out purple loosestrife, you know that it has an amazing root system that will challenge even the strongest back. Scraps of roots left in the ground will start new plants. Not only that, each mature plant produces millions of tiny seeds every year, so even if you did poison or pull a plant, the soil is full of time-release capsules — seeds that will start the process all over again next year, and the year after that, and so forth. Even burning the plants will not solve the problem. But it can be kept under control with the use of introduced beetles.

Since 1994, beetles that eat purple loosestrife have been successfully reducing stands of this exotic. They reduce the number of plants to about 10 percent of pre-introduction levels; as the number of plants drops, so does the number of predator beetles. Similar efforts are under way to control phragmites, that tall grass that has such beautiful plumes in wetlands and roadside ditches.

Casagrande has been using biocontrols to reduce populations of the lily leaf beetle that has been decimating our oriental and Asiatic lilies in recent years. The beetles are so pretty that you might want

to use them as earrings: bright red with black trim, about 3/8ths of an inch long. Their larvae, in contrast, are disgusting: They carry their excrement on their backs to deter birds — and organic gardeners. Casagrande and his co-workers have introduced parasitoids from Europe, tiny wasps that reduce the beetle's population. The parasitoids are doing the job at test sites in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and are established at release sites in New Hampshire and Maine.

So what can the home gardener do? First, realize that help is on the way in the form of biocontrols. Second, recognize that herbicides for plants and insecticides for beetles ultimately don't work. Yes, you can kill lily leaf beetles or loosestrife with a spray, but you can't eliminate them. Third, use pest-resistant species such as 'Black Beauty,' a lily that is less attractive to the lily leaf beetle. Lastly, handpick beetles. I handpicked lily leaf beetles twice a day last summer and never saw a larva.

As organic gardeners, we have to accept that we are not in total control of the environment, and that sometimes we have to wait or endure some losses. Biological controls do work. Some exotic pests, like the birch leaf miner, are now nothing more than a minor annoyance, and there are already places where purple loosestrife is no longer a problem. So stay the course — be organic.

<http://www.ppplants.com>

Web Based Educational Resources For The Organic Vegetable Gardener

By James Brown

More and more men and women across the globe are learning that there truly is a great deal of truth to the old adage that we are what we eat. To this end, more and more people — again, all across the

planet — are electing to consume organic foods products. To this end, many people are also electing to grow their own organic vegetables. If you are a person who is interested in growing his or her own organic vegetables, you likely would like to identify educational resources that can aid you in learning more about growing wholesome organic vegetables now and into the future.

First of all, in the brick and mortar world, there are now a number of wonderful books on the market that deal with organic gardening and organic home gardens. If you are interested in finding these types of texts, you will want to pay a visit to your local bookseller. For the most part, most local book stores across the globe maintain a selection of books on gardening on their shelves. More and more often, these booksellers include books on organic gardening within their inventories as well.

In addition to what is available at booksellers in the brick and mortar world, many libraries in local communities over the globe carry at least a minimal selection of books that can be helpful in training a person about the ins and out of organic gardening.

However, with all that is available in the brick and mortar world, there is a plethora of information on the Internet and World Wide Web through which a person can obtain in depth information about organic vegetable gardening. There are specific websites that deal with organic vegetable gardening. These different websites offer a wide array of different types of services to people interested in organic gardening.

First of all, many of these sites offer a resource library through which a person can obtain definitive information about growing certain types of organic vegetable and fruit products. The resource libraries can be invaluable to an organic gardener in the 21st century.

In addition to informational resources on the Net, there are also websites that offer organic gardeners community forums. Through these online forums, a person can share organic gardening experiences with thousands and thousand of other people from all corners of the globe — a truly helpful resource for people in this day and age.

James Brown writes about

<http://www.HomeGardenCoupons.com>

, How to Save on Gardenning and

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