THE SEEDLING

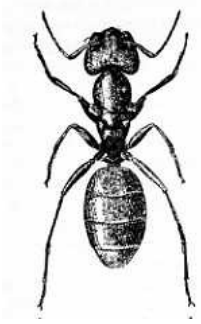
The Newsletter of Burnaby and Region Allotment Garden Association
BARAGA , Volume 28, Number 3, October 2009

A World of Insects

Did you ever see a promotion for DDT? Such as the newsreels of the fifties? One I remember pictured a truck with a big tank, hoses attached, blithely spraying clouds of insecticide into the air just like a thick fog; neither the sprayers or the spectators in the street wore any protection. The message was clear: mankind rules, people can use toxic chemicals to eliminate and control all those pesky insects so easily.

The truth turned out to be rather different. Not only was the concoction an insidious, but deadly poison, its long term effect was to create races of super insects. The whole idea that mankind can control the world, or the environment, or the insects needs a lot of serious rethinking.

Let's talk about body mass. The insects in the world en mass are 27 billion tons (a scientific estimate - no one's weighing); that's many times the body mass of all human beings. How about numbers? No one has counted, but it is estimated that there are about a quintillion individual insects; a quintillion is a '1' followed by eighteen zeros. The insect world embraces 80% of all animal species. About one million have been described in scientific literature, but there is certainly as many species again undescribed and perhaps a lot more besides.



Talk about being outnumbered and out-gunned.

So where does the gardener stand in a world full of insects? Inevitably many of them will appear in the garden. There will be butterflies and moths. There will be bees and wasps. Ants are to be found everywhere. On most days there are hundreds of flies zipping around, consuming all kinds of dead matter from decaying animals and plants to generally cleaning up the faeces and debris of other animals. There will be beetles contending for their share of the spoils. Don't confuse them with true bugs (the wings are different: beetles have two rigid wings in front and two membranous ones behind; bugs usually have two pairs of membranous wings). Closely related

Board News & Views

Winter Get-Away: Are you planning a winter get-away later this fall or in early winter? Please remember that your renewal of membership must be received by January 31, 2010. If you are likely to be away when the renewal notices are distributed around December 1st, you should request an advance copy of the notice in early November by dropping a note to BARAGA at its mailing address. And have a pleasant get-away!

Tree Policy: After several months of consideration the board has come up with the following policy on trees and shrubs on allotment gardens:

Trees, other than fruit trees and fruit bearing shrubs, will no longer be allowed on a member's plot. All fruit trees and fruit bearing shrubs will be allowed only if kept to a maximum height of seven feet or less and placed in such a position as not to overhang any common pathway at any time or shade another plot from May to October.

All non-fruit bearing trees and any fruit trees or shrubs over seven feet in height must be removed by January 1, 2011. Existing fruit trees may be pruned to conform with the maximum height requirement.

After it is adopted the policy will be included in the Handbook in Chapter 11, Plot Maintenance.

Partial Plots: BARAGA is preparing four half plots for rental in 2010. The half plots will be approximately five hundred square feet and will be located at the western end of the BARAGA site south of the drainage ditch in the vicinity of plot 168.

The rental fee for each half plot will be forty dollars plus the ten dollar membership fee. A reduction in the rental fee for volunteer time will not be provided.

Any member currently renting a plot may indicate interest in renting a half plot by calling Janet at 604-842-8571.

Fall Clean-Up: with the passing of the autumnal equinox, the short light days of winter are at hand. Gardeners are reminded of the policy requiring the clean-up of growing spaces before November 1st. While actively growing crops or winter mulch are fine spent crops and particularly weeds should be removed. When doing the clean-up look out for purple lamium (germinates in fall and was described in previous newsletters); if left to grow it will take over an allotment during the winter months. A heavy mulch will suppress it (see below Newspapers and cardboard).

Good time to get tetanus shot

by the Leader-Post (Regina), May 13, 2008

As Canadians gear up for gardening season and farmers head into the fields, the Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness and Promotion is gently reminding everyone to update their tetanus shot.
The coalition recommends all adults check their immunization records to see if they have had a tetanus booster shot in the last 10 years.

"If you haven't had a cut or an injury that required medical care where you might have received a tetanus shot then it would certainly be something to consider if you haven't been immunized in the last 10 years," said Donna Martin, a public health nurse supervisor with the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region.
A recent Leger Marketing survey found that while most Canadians are aware of the need for a tetanus shot, three in 10 adults said they have not received a booster shot in more than a decade.

On the Prairies 67 per cent of adults aren't likely to have updated immunization from this serious, and potentially deadly, bacterial disease.

While rusty nails and other rough, uneven rusty metal surfaces harbour tetanus bacteria, it also occurs naturally in soil, compost or packaged potting mixtures and animal feces that can be found in the garden. Typically the tetanus bacteria enters the body through an open wound in the skin, such as the kind you can get by cutting yourself on sharp gardening tools or jagged objects buried in the dirt.

Tetanus is an illness caused by a neurotoxin (or poison) made by bacteria that block normal control of nerve reflexes in the spinal column.

The tetanus booster is safe, effective, and free for all Canadians, so there is really no reason why anyone should be unprotected, according to Martin.

Adults should receive a tetanus booster shot every 10 years. Adults over 60 years of age are at increased risk of tetanus as they may not have been immunized against the disease when they were younger or may have neglected to keep their shots up to date.

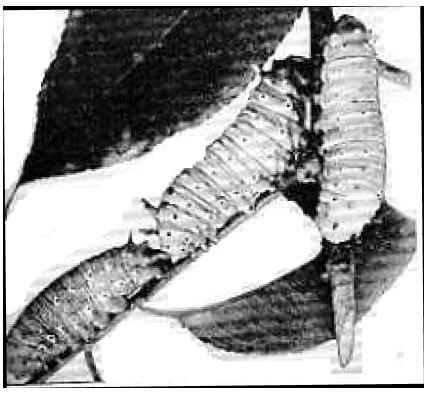
Immigrants to Canada may also be at risk as many would not have received tetanus immunization in their country of origin and should check whether they need to receive full immunization against tetanus.
To protect yourself against tetanus ensure your immunization is up to date. If not, visit your doctor and ask for a booster shot. Martin also recommends wearing gloves and protective clothing and footwear while gardening and if you are injured, clean the wounds thoroughly and immediately with soap and warm water.

"One of the downfalls of immunization is its success in that it prevents disease to the point that people feel there is no longer a risk. But if you let your guard down and reduce the numbers of people who are immunized then the risk can crop up again," Martin said, stressing the important role immunization programs play in controlling, eliminating and eradicating vaccine-preventable diseases in Canada.

(Thanks to Bella Scholz for this article.)

(**Insect World**, continued from front page) to bugs are scales, aphids, leafhoppers and whiteflies, all likely garden dwellers. Cockroaches, grasshoppers, crickets, walking sticks, praying mantids all appear in someone's garden, even if not ours. Other casual visitors include lacewings, damsel flies, dragon flies and possibly termites. We won't even think of lice!

Most of the above information was gleaned from a book: Insects and Gardens by Eric Grissell (Timber Press, Portland OR, 2001). It is worth finding in your public library. The author is an entomologist and a keen gardener and, unsurprisingly, has a very different view of the role of insects in the garden. Before describing this view, let's briefly look at what insects are actually doing in the garden.



Larvae, juvenile insects, munch as if there is no tomorrow. As adults they eat lightly or not at all.

In fact they are doing as we expect, feeding, sheltering, reproducing - living there. Their living includes two invaluable chores from the gardeners' point of view: pollination and cleanup, getting rid of tons of garden detritus. Pollination is essential to many crops and essential for all plants if there are to be seeds for the future. The prime means of pollination by huge margin is insects (very often honey bees). Less obvious, but also essential, is the voracious appetite insects have. While many of them are herbivores (which means they eat your plants and crops), many are content to clean up after us and many just clean up each other. There is a regular food chain in nature in which insects are major links, controlling and reducing other insects numbers and becoming food for others in turn. Like it or not gardening is a natural process and gardeners cannot avoid insect presence.

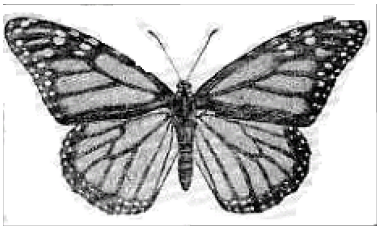
Now we come to the more controversial part of Grissell's approach. The traditional approach to gardening is distinctly interventionist; gardeners are always "pruning, weeding, spraying, watering, fertilizing, adding plants, removing plants" and so on. In Grissell's view we do better to embrace nature. Grissell wants us to invite as many insects as possible into our gardens and learn to enjoy them.

While a completely natural environment will support an abundance of insect life, only on the rarest occasions does one species get out of hand and severely damage the plant life despite the fact that all the insects food ultimately derives from plants. There is a natural balance and control at work. The natural food chain is of insects eating plants, these in turn are eaten by other insects and they in turn by yet others. If we accept insect presence and are willing to tolerate some crop damage, by planting varied crops, even including some plants to specifically feed insects, we can continue to garden without bothering about insect pests. Above all Grissell wants us to view the garden as a "living structure that exists within the natural world, not apart from it."

Grissell includes a beautiful illustration of what he means. In the picture a plant stem is shown covered with aphids; an

ant, interested in collecting honeydew, stands guard protecting the aphids; but underneath a minute parasitic wasp can be seen laying eggs inside the bodies of the aphids. Some aphids are already turning brown as they succumb to the internal parasite. In this case the gardener need do nothing; nature will take its course and the aphids will be controlled.

To encourage insects Grissell suggests two strategies. The first is the maximum diversity of plants; plant as many different crops as possible and intermingle them, don't make a monoculture. In an allotment garden with hundreds of different gardeners that isn't hard. Secondly he wants us to change our garden habits. Instead of the tidy fall clean-up (which is required by BARAGA) removing all plant debris, he suggests that we garden all year round, leaving decaying crops in the ground, allow dying perennials and grasses to stand until spring. This provides food for some and shelter to overwinter for many more including predators that emerge in spring, ensuring a balanced insect population at all times.



This condensed article hardly does Eric Grissell justice; his book is much longer and includes some stunning colour photography. His theme too is a shot fired across the bows of most conventional interventionist gardeners, myself included. The idea of letting plants gradually die back in winter is directly at odds with the BARAGA handbook. Nevertheless Grissell's theme of working with nature rather than against it is well worth some serious consideration.

Newspapers and Cardboard

Although unsightly, a mulch of newspapers and cardboard is often effective in suppressing weeds for a short period of time. The darkness a layer of cardboard or a couple thicknesses of newsprint creates prevents the germination of many light sensitive weed seeds. It also denies photosynthesis to some very persistent and determined weeds, for example horsetail. By the time the mulch has decomposed and disappeared into the soil so have the weeds. Ideally a layer of another more sightly mulch can be applied - straw, shredded leaves, grass clippings, for example - and used to disguise the newsprint and hold it in place. After a few months everything will breakdown and the remains can be turned into the soil increasing the organic content

Free Soil Tests

Want to know what you are working with? We can do a limited number of simple tests if any BARAGA members are interested. It will have to be on a first come/first served basis. The soil will be tested for four things only: acidity/alkalinity, nitrogen, potash and phosphorus.

To provide a test sample, dig four teaspoons of soil from different quarters of your garden from about three inches below the surface. Put them in a small bottle, empty pill container, attach a label with your plot number and phone number.

Phone David Tamblin (604-521-4318) to make drop off arrangements. If your soil is tested we may use the results in a future newsletter article; you will not be named, nor will your plot be identified, but pertinent information obtained from the tests may be used.

The Neglected Parsnip

Judging by the withered specimens one often sees lying at the back of the grocery shelf parsnips have fallen on some hard times. It was not always so. For the Romans and Europeans of the Middle Ages they were a staple, until the introduction of the potato. Over time they seem to have suffered a further diminution. (The garden writer, Anna Pavord, relates that in Russian "parsnip" translates as "pasternak"; surely sales of that classic romance, Dr. Zhivago, would be lower if we were told it was written by Boris Parsnip?)

Parsnips do not really warrant this disdain and neglect. They are sweet and hardy and readily overwinter in the ground. In many ways they are an ideal trouble free, durable crop.

Parsnip seed is a little tricky. It does not store well and needs to be kept a little moist. It is only considered viable for one year.

Parsnips are always grown from seed planted directly in the ground. If grown in rows the seed is planted about a half inch deep and thinned to at least three inches apart. For larger parsnips six inches apart is recommended. Rows need to be spaced twelve inches apart. Germination can take up to three weeks; if protected by a cloche or

row cover from cool and/or wet weather, results will improve.

Parsnips grow best in a deep, light soil. If the soil is light and fluffy - well dug - the root will grow straight and deep; it will not split. The recommended acidity is 6.5, so lime will be needed in the soil at some time. The soil should be kept as evenly moist as possible otherwise the parsnips are apt to crack and split. Once growing parsnips require little attention until winter or harvest, with the exception of weeding.

Everyone agrees that the best tasting parsnips are those that winter in situ. The colder the winter, the more starch is turned into sugar and the sweeter the parsnips will taste. If a mulch of straw or dry leaves is available, it may keep the ground soft enough to allow a harvest at any time.

What the parsnip needs most is some good publicity; how about a cookbook "One Hundred and One Recipes for Delicious Parsnips"? While boiling, steaming or pureeing the parsnip is traditional, there are many other and often better ways of

preparing them for the table. Crisp parsnip chips can be made by deep-frying slices of parboiled parsnips. Sliced parsnips can be sauteed in butter with a hint of curry powder as additional flavouring. Parsnips cooked in a pan beside a roast are traditional and delicious.

What is a Potager?

Have you encountered the term"potager" when reading about gardening particularly about growing vegetables? Simply put it is growing vegetables in a formal garden. In a potager the same classical lines and layout that delineate a French garden style are applied to a style of growing vegetables and fruit - with a few decorative flowers.

Beds are arranged in a geometric pattern, formal borders enclose these beds and everything is carefully planned and balanced. Usually there is a centre-piece, perhaps a gazebo or a special tall, spectacular or statuesque plant. The effect of the whole is very formal and symmetry is the overall consideration for any planting. Altogether it is a vegetable garden designed to please the tastes of a classical period architect.

Vegetables are used in unusual ways. Some plants, for example marigolds, are used to make the borders that enclose the beds. In the beds themselves are often rows of vegetables selected to make contrasting patterns; savoy and red cabbage might be planted in a pattern in one bed and the opposite bed be planted with broccoli and red endives in a similar pattern. Flowers and herbs are often interspersed with the vegetables. Clipped bays, espaliered fruit

A handsome apple crop at BARAGA. Espaliered fruit trees make sculptured features in a potager. Photo: Bella Scholz

trees, sculptural plants like artichoke or a trained zucchini, or backdrops of scarlet runner beans and sweet peas, are used to emphasize height.

While this style of vegetable gardening may seem far removed from the practical considerations of a west-coast allotment garden, it does have its virtues. Intermingling vegetables with each other or intermingling vegetables with flowers and herbs may offer an opportunity for increasing fertility, it may increase productivity, and it may well confuse some gardens pests. Obvious formal design in planting impresses the casual viewer with the garden's success; the formal layout will appeal to the subconscious minds of many who crave order and design in their worlds. Many of us, perhaps subconsciously, want to see order, neatness and balance imposed on a garden. A potager does this in spades.

Great Squash

2009 was a good year for many crops. There is a wide variety of squash grown at BARAGA including heritage varieties.

Photo by Bella Scholz

Tomato Debris

Late blight struck many tomatoes this year. It is important to stop the disease cycle by removing all diseased material completely from the garden. **Do not compost it**; the fungi spores will persist in the soil.

Some Interesting Dates

✦ October 17th & 18th , 2009 - Apple Fest at UBC Botanical Garden, Marine Drive. A chance to taste a wide variety and find sources for stock.

✦ October 25th, 2009 - Mushroom Show at VanDusen Garden Floral Hall. See wild species identified and taste the cooking.

✦ January 19th, 2010 - Become an Organic Master Gardener: a comprehensive course in 16 sessions will be offered at Burnaby Central

Dahlias, a favourite flower at BARAGA - Bella Scholz

School. Be sure to preregister, info session on January 11th.

Info About BARAGA

✦✦ The BARAGA mailing address is:
Burnaby and Region Allotment Gardens Association
Box 209, 141- 6200 McKay Avenue,
Burnaby, B.C.
V5H 4M9

✦✦ Contact phone number for plot rental or getting on the wait list is 604-842-8571. Please note that the waiting time for a plot is now about two years.

✦✦ To contact the president Don Hatch call 604-433-8055 and leave a message please. You may also e-mail us at - support@baraga.ca

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✦✦ This newsletter was edited by David Tamblin (604-521-4318). Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of BARAGA.
