

'KEEP SKUNKS'

There are many ways to overcome the pesky Japanese beetle. You've got lots of help; the birds, wasps—and skunks—are all on your side.

"Keep skunks", I advise whenever the question—"What can we do about Japanese beetles?"—comes up.

It's actually one of the more dependable ways to keep these armorclad pests under control. Now, admittedly, skunks do make holes in your lawn. But, each of those holes stands for the annihilation of emerging larvae—the skunks devour the grubs wholesale—just a little before they'd otherwise be transformed into hungry beetles that would promptly go for your soybeans, white roses or grape leaves.

The life cycle of the Japanese beetle begins when the eggs are laid, usually two to three inches below the grass in the lawn, where the larvae will be well situated to start chewing on the grass roots as soon as warm weather starts in the spring. Where there is a bad infestation, the grass will turn brown and die.

Sometime during the summer (depending on what zone you live in) the grubs will move up toward the surface—right where the skunks can get at them—and finally emerge as Japanese beetles. This happens in July where I live in Vermont, but farther south it can happen as early as late May or early June. One of the only good things a gardener can say for a prolonged summer drought is that the dryness will kill off a good many grubs, as you probably have noticed. You may also have noticed that after a rainy summer, the next year's crop of beetles is heavy and flourishing.

I've also noticed house sparrows picking Japanese beetles off the grape leaves, and suddenly found that my respect for these nuisance birds went up, also. I like both these controls because you can see them at work (or see the results). The spores of milky spore disease (*Bacillus popilliae*) work invisibly underground, first being ingested by the beetle larvae and then infecting them. Though the powdery material is initially expensive, it will remain effective for many years—from 15 to 20, in fact—when inserted at intervals of four or five feet in the lawn turf. Application requires approximately seven pounds per acre.

There are several other methods of control, two of which I use regularly. One is the plain, good old-fashioned way of getting out early in the morning when the beetles are least active, carrying a cup of water with a film of kerosene or paint thinner on top, and flicking the pests into the cup where they soon die.

Catharine Osgood Foster
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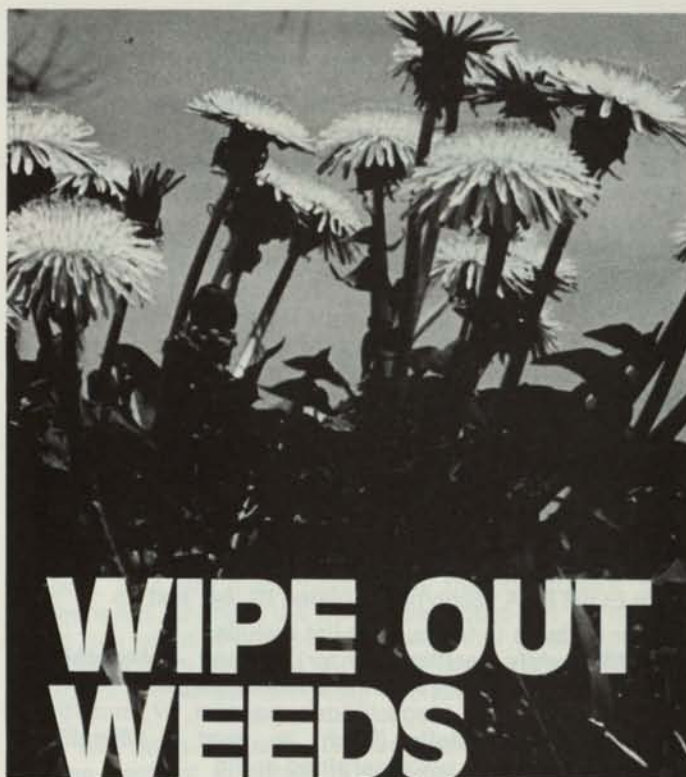
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