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The Bug(s) From Hell

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Once upon a time in Connecticut during a Perennial Plant Association nursery tour, a grower from British Columbia got a nasty shock. Wide-eyed, he exclaimed, “John! I just saw the bug from hell!”

He had encountered his first Japanese beetles, “all over the roses, eating and copulating at the same time!” This was 1991. JBs were first ID’d in New Jersey in 1916. They were problematic east of the Rockies by the 1960s: Suddenly they were everywhere, skeletonizing roses and much more.

My most memorable JB incident came when I selected a big, gorgeous potted hibiscus for a catalog picture. It was on gravel—not very photogenic—so I posed it on grass with a nice dark hemlock background. Instantly, it was swarmed by beetles. Naturally, there were none on the gravel, where grubs can’t overwinter.

By shooing, smashing, then dashing to my tripod, repeatedly, I finally got a decent, mostly bugless image. And I agreed wholeheartedly: JBs are the spawn of Satan.

But isn’t there always a new BFH every few years—a critter hell-bent on disrupting, if not destroying, something precious or profitable?
Some bugs bug everybody: JBs, stinkbugs, emerald ash borer, spotted lanternfly. New species have no co-evolved natural predators. Natives don’t recognize them as food—at first. Most, not all, bugs from hell gradually become bugs from heck.

Others torment the green industries: aphids, spider mites, fungus gnats, whitefly. One by one, we figure them out and deal with them. Crisis control becomes routine maintenance.

COVID-19 had one positive side effect: virtual seminars, which exploded during the shutdowns. A recent Penn State Extension webinar taught me that new invasives can be here for decades between first sighting and “all over the roses!” Michael Skvarla, head of PSU’s Insect Identification Lab, said it takes 10 to 20 years “before they become populous enough to notice them.” Ergo, NJ’s JBs probably arrived well before 1916.

Today’s most hellish BFH candidate: Jumping worms, AKA Georgia jumpers, Asian crazy worms, even disco

worms. They writhe and flail vigorously, unlike the laid-back European worms we all dug up for fish bait as kids.

Wait … European? Yep. Those familiar critters immigrated in the 1600s, probably via ship ballast. Said Michael, “You’ve almost certainly never seen a native earthworm.”

Those earthworms aerate soil and their castings make nutrients available to surrounding plants. But JWs live at the surface, not burrowing deeply, devouring leaf litter so voraciously, the opposite happens: Every scrap of organic matter is consumed, leaving soil looking “like coffee grounds,” parched and infertile.

Michael’s side-by-side slides were startling: On the left, a healthy wooded area, lots of trees, thick green understory. On the right, an eerie JW-infested copse: tree trunks surrounded by bare earth.

Now established in 29 States and several Canadian Provinces, JWs live just one season, leaving cold-hardy eggs that hatch the following spring or later. Adults are hermaphroditic; any two can mate and reproduce. Worse: They can also be parthenogenic, able to reproduce solo. Just one can beget an infestation.

So will hellish gradually segue to heckish? Co-presenter Calvin Norman, Assistant Professor of Forestry, wasn’t optimistic. The only known control, tea tree meal, is too expensive for wide application, and, he said, “I’m not betting on biocontrols anytime soon.”

Research and development can take 10 years and cost millions, and no one’s developing any. Forestry is “underappreciated and underfunded.” Worm specialists aren’t plentiful and “worms aren’t sexy” like more visible pests. Plus, “worms have great press agents … great public acceptance.”

JWs are currently unregulated. Said Norman, “You can buy them at the gas station.” And what do anglers do with leftover bait when they pack up?
JWs arrived sometime before 1930. Michael’s pet theory: They hitchhiked in from Japan with D.C.’s revered cherry trees in 1912.

Back to that shocking CT scene: A century after their NJ debut, JBs finally reached BC in 2017. Eastern growers and ag agents tried to prevent it, with screening, scouting and phytosanitary inspections, but they got there.

Bottom line: There’s no easy fix once a newcomer gains a foothold. Michael’s advice about jumping worms and woodlands? “Do your best to keep them out. We can’t do much once they’re in there.” **GP**

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