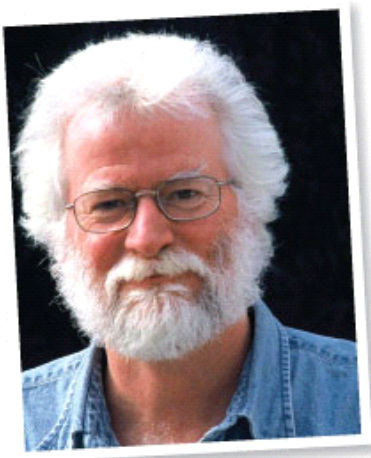


7/1/2020

A Brief History of Havoc

John Friel



John Friel

Some calamity or another has been threatening to ravage the green industries for as long as I can remember. A particularly scary one was Western flower thrips (there's no such thing as a thrip; thrips is both singular and plural). This tiny winged doomsday machine carried TSWV, Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus. The strain attacking ornamentals was renamed Impatiens Necrotic Spot Virus.

As time went on, spider mites, whitefly and aphids took their turns as bogeymen. As time goes on, as time does, we dealt, and deal, with them. Breeders developed disease-resistant varieties. Chemical companies conjured new weapons. "Scout" joined our vocabulary. A new industry—biological controls—arose, deputizing good bugs to hunt bad guys.

Integrated Pest Management is now so ingrained, it's hard to believe that the norm was more like "Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out." In the '80s, public gardens implementing IPM posted educational signs: Yes, you'll see insects in our previously sterile plantings. Please don't call the pest police—that ladybug is in our posse.

During a 1991 Perennial Plant Association garden tour, a western nurseryman reported, breathlessly, that he'd just seen his first Japanese beetle. With obvious repugnance he described JB's skeletonizing rose bushes, "copulating and eating at the same time! It's the bug from hell!"

JB reared its ugly head in New Jersey in 1916. It's still an expensive nuisance for ornamental growers; those of us who ship throughout North America take elaborate precautions to exclude them. Ironically, back home they're a minor problem. Japan doesn't share America's addiction to turf, where grubs develop.

Last year, when we still attended things, I attended an Extension seminar on Spotted Lanternfly. A presenter pointed out that infestations seemingly poised for devastation sometimes fizzle—e.g., brown marmorated stinkbugs. First identified in the '90s here in Pennsylvania, it soon caused tens of millions of dollars in damage to fruit crops.

Now? Where there had been hundreds, in sheds and attics, there are handfuls. Eight years ago, I vacuumed fifty BMSBs from one piece of stored boating gear. All spring this year, I've seen maybe 15.

If BMSB is still hammering your orchard, I don't mean to downplay your pain. But it's nearly fallen off the radar partly due to pure serendipity: As scientists debated whether to release a control, the parasitic Asian "samurai wasp," it

suddenly showed up on its own.

Emerald ash borer appeared in Michigan in 2002, rapidly wreaking havoc on our tree canopy as cataclysmic as Dutch Elm Disease and Chestnut Blight. A very thin silver lining in a very dark cloud: Gunwales for canoes, like one my son built, were milled from trees felled preemptively, by the millions.

The bug from hell du jour is the aforementioned Spotted Lanternfly. This disarmingly pretty monster destroys grapes and apples, damages hardwoods and—beer fans shudder—it's hell on hops. PA has the dishonor of being Ground Zero for SLF, too. And then there were millions.

Every adult I spot becomes a swatted lanternfly. Black and white nymphs are presently trapping themselves wholesale on sticky-tape-wrapped trees out front. A friend described them as “evil-looking ... like tiny alien spacecraft with polka dots.”

My point, if I'm still entitled to one, is simple: It's always something and we always figure it out. Our woes, present and future, won't magically vanish. But we'll figure it out.

But I say this from my bunker, dodging the virus du jour attacking not plants but people, unsure if I'm over- or under-reacting. I want very much to believe that in time, someone will figure it out—in time. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.