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Japanese Beetles on the Increase

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When I was a young 4-Her in York County, Nebraska I was in love with an older woman. Well, actually I was in love with her 4-H insect collection. This young lady was several years older than me and was also in the 4-H entomology project. She had the coolest insect display and she had a Japanese beetle in her collection.

You see, in the 1960s the Japanese beetle was only found east of the Mississippi River. They wouldn't be in Nebraska for a couple more decades. After the exhibit went to the State Fair, the 4-Her had a visit from Department of Agriculture entomologists to find out where the Japanese beetle had been collected. The beetle had been collected in Pennsylvania when the family was there on vacation. At the time I really didn't understand the concern over this little green beetle, but now I do.

The Japanese beetle is a small greenish scarab beetle almost one half inch long. It has brownish bronze wing covers and along its sides are a series of white dots. Don't confuse this with the green June beetle which is an inch long and a noisy slow flyer. The green June beetle is a native species, the Japanese beetle is not.

Scarab beetles have a larval form that most of us call a grub. For most species this is their most damaging stage of growth. They then pupate into the adult beetle and then become nothing much more than an occasional annoyance. Japanese beetles are different however. While the larval grub form will feed on the roots of plants, the adult beetles are probably more damaging. Adult beetles tend to be gregarious and while they'll feed on over 300 species of plants , they are strongly attracted to certain species including rose, birch, linden, crabapple, grape, Virginia creeper and buckeye.

Their feeding damage is quite distinctive. They feed on leaves but instead of devouring the entire leaf they often just eat the surface off the leaves leaving a lace like or cellophane appearance to the leaf. Often all that is left are a network of veins with no green material left. As the populations grow in an area you will often find several dozen feeding at once, frequently starting at the top of the plant feeding in the full sunshine. While an adult beetle will only live for 30 to 45 days, their emergence as adults is staggered over several weeks so you may see intense feeding damage for six weeks or more.

Japanese beetles have slowly been moving west across the state. We confirmed the first Japanese beetles in Geary County just a few years ago. Last year I received scattered reports of Japanese beetles around the area. This year I am seeing Japanese beetles in many locations and even when I don't see them, I'm starting to see more areas of obvious Japanese beetle feeding damage. Keep in mind that foliar feeding damage in the latter parts of summer generally look far worse then they really are. But on small ornamentals, like roses, treatment may be necessary.

Sometimes the easiest way to deal with the beetles is direct removal. You can often shake them off of smaller plants into a bucket of soapy water where they will drown. In some cases, though, there are simply too many of them or they are too high in a tree to make the soapy water bucket method practical. In these cases you will want to spray. Standard lawn and garden insecticides like cyfluthrin, bifenthrin, and cyhalothrin are going to be most effective and give the longest residual control. If you have questions or need an ID confirmation, bring the insect to the Extension Office or email me a photo at cotte@ksu.edu.

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