

What's That Green Thing?

A local Master Garden hotline has been receiving frequent calls from people asking about a big green bug. It is appearing in peoples yards, fruit orchards, various plants, anywhere and everywhere. Yet, a woman arriving at the Master Gardener table during the Madera Fair was heard describing this beautiful iridescent, "beetle-like thing," living under her oak tree.

She whimsically asked if the bug was a good thing or bad thing.

Trying to separate fact from fiction, and at the same time looking for more defining information, I questioned further. I discovered that the big green thing is appearing most frequently in gardens and fruit orchards. Fall appears to be its season of choice, after-all, this is when fruit ripens, drops and begins to rot. The big green thing likes fruit.

The large, one and a quarter inch metallic green fruit beetle, a thing called cotinis mutabilis, attacks mature or rotting fruit such as tomatoes, peaches, plums, figs and apricots. In fact, the green thing is likely doing us a service by cleaning up spoiling fruit. Can this be a bad thing?

Unfortunately, the big green thing is frequently mistaken for a little green thing known as a Japanese beetle. The Japanese beetle, which also has a green metallic color, is much smaller than the big thing.

From the publication, Pests of the Garden and Small Farm, I read, "the larval stage (of the green fruit beetle) is a C-shaped, creamy white grub, which feeds on decaying organic material in the soil. The larva does not damage plants. Manure and partially decomposed compost are favorite feeding sites and adult beetles seek out these areas to lay eggs. Adults also tend to feed in fruit trees near these sites."

If these beetles become problem, and I hardly think natural composters are entitled to the label "problem," the University of California recommends removing all manure from areas near fruit trees to control green fruit beetles. Flooding an area with water for at least 2 days will kill the grubs. When adult beetles complete their yearly cycle, they die. Insecticides are not necessary, nor are they recommended.

The Japanese beetle, on the other hand, is far more bothersome. Adults are mostly a shiny metallic green with a coppery brown wing cover and tufts of short, whitish hairs along their sides. Larvae are plump, whitish grubs and unfortunately difficult to distinguish from many other kinds of larvae.

The most serious damage of the Japanese beetle is caused by its larvae feeding on roots of grasses and herbaceous species. Most harm to woody ornamentals is from adults feeding on leaves, flowers, and fruit. Adults chew out tissue between the veins, leaving a

lacy skeleton of damaged leaves. Although this damage is unsightly, vigorous plants tolerate extensive defoliation.

The most effective control against the Japanese beetle is treating its larvae in soil. A commercially available microbial insecticide, milky spore disease (*Bacillus popilliae*), can be applied to turf near trees and shrubs to infect and kill immature beetles before adults emerge. Some broad-spectrum insecticides are also effective, but unless a quicker kill of high populations is needed, it is better to use milky spore disease. It might take several years of treatment before it provides long term control. This naturally occurring insect disease will not kill earthworms and other beneficial organisms in the soil and helps conserve natural enemies, such as parasitic wasps that attack Japanese beetles. This information was provided by a UC Davis publication, *Pests of Landscape Trees and Shrubs*.

If you see a bug that you suspect is a Japanese beetle, place it in jar and take it to your Cooperative Extension office for identification. Follow a course of action to prevent this pest from becoming established in your area.

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