

Japanese Beetles

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Japanese beetle damage on a variety of plants has been my primary question of late. Affected leaves are skeletonized meaning green tissue is removed but not leaf veins making leaves appear lacy.

While most insects are selective about what they eat, Japanese beetles feed on over 300 species of plants. Some of their favorites are roses, lindens, grapes, beans, and sweet corn.

Adults are seven-sixteenth inch long, metallic green beetles with copper colored wing covers. Six tufts of white hair along each side of their abdomen are a distinguishing feature. Beetles live about 30 to 45 days.

The larvae is a C-shaped, creamy white grub. High populations of grubs in lawns can cause damage. They feed on roots causing turf to turn brown and roll or lift up like a carpet or new piece of sod.

Most preventive grub control products applied in June for our common annual grub will control Japanese beetle grubs. However, controlling the grubs will not prevent beetles flying in and causing damage.

Adult beetles chew on leaves, flowers, and fruit. They are gregarious and feed in groups, starting at the tops of plants and working their way down. Leaves are skeletonized. Flowers are finely shredded as if blasted with sand and fruits, especially if overripe, are hollowed out.

Japanese beetles overwinter as grubs. They feed for a short period in spring and then turn into adults. Beetles emerge in June and July to feed, mate and lay eggs. Beetle activity is most intense for 4 to 5 weeks beginning in late June. Grub damage occurs late July into September.

While beetle numbers can be high and damage severe, trees and shrubs recover. Annual plants like vegetables and flowers can be killed or yields reduced. Feeding on fruits will reduce quality and yield.

Controlling Japanese beetles is challenging. On established trees and large shrubs, it may be best to do nothing. Coverage with insecticide sprays is difficult and repeated applications are needed with many beneficial insects also killed.

On newly planted trees and shrubs as well as roses, flowers and vegetables, beetles can be knocked off into a bucket of soapy water. While time consuming, early morning or about 7 pm is a good time to do this as beetles are sluggish.

If insecticides are applied to smaller plants, products containing pyrethroids such as cyfluthrin or bifenthrin provides 2 to 3 weeks control. Sevin has a shorter control period of 1 to 2 weeks. The organic insecticides Neem and Pyola deter beetles for 3 to 4 days. Be sure to read and follow label directions.

Do NOT purchase inexpensive traps for Japanese beetles. These attract more to your yard and garden than they kill. And again, do not try to kill the grubs in an effort to reduce beetles since new beetles fly in.

Japanese beetles are a fairly new pest to Nebraska but are here to stay. When selecting plants, avoid their favorites. Along with lindens, roses and grapes, these include Norway and Japanese maple, horse chestnut, American elm, cherry, plum, and crabapple.

Some trees and shrubs not preferred by Japanese beetle are red oak, tuliptree, Magnolia, red maple, pine, Hydrangea, Japanese Yew, lilac, Juniper, Forsythia and coralberry. Perennials they tend to avoid are Columbine, Coreopsis, Dianthus, coralbell, lily and Veronica. Annual flowers not preferred are Ageratum, snapdragon, cockscomb, Begonia and Nasturtium.