

Let's Get Growing

Manual eviction of bothersome bugs not for squeamish

By MARJORIE MASON HOGUE
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At this time of year something new blooms every day so a stroll through the garden is always exciting. One day recently, this daily inspection revealed an unpleasant surprise - one of a group of three blooming aquilegia (columbine) was missing. A closer look showed that only the root and a small stub remained and the other two plants were also being devoured.

The culprit was neither rabbit nor groundhog, but hundreds of tiny green caterpillars so perfectly camouflaged that from a distance they were invisible. These voracious creatures are the larvae of a sawfly, an insect in the same order as bees and wasps. Instead of stingers, the females have a sawtooth-edged ovipositor with which they cut slits in leaves or bore holes into stems to lay eggs. Other plants which are often host to sawfly larvae are roses, violets, mountain ash, pink spruce and hemlock. Where insects are con-

cerned, I choose to refrain from using chemical sprays, so my first plan of attack is to pick and squish! As a child I killed tomato hornworms to earn my allowance, but if you are squeamish, wear gloves or hire a child. Because the task of checking each columbine leaf would be so tedious, this is one of the few times that I resort to using a spray of natural insecticide, either insecticidal soap or pyrethrin made from the flowers of certain chrysanthemums. Pyrethrin will kill many insects, including the good ladybugs, so don't spray the whole garden, just the columbines. Always follow the directions for application exactly. Spraying in the cool of morning or evening when there is no wind. For best results, the foliage should be dry but the soil moist. Spraying a moisture-stressed plant will cause leaf damage.

Another small caterpillar that is very active now is the leafroller. I noticed that the leaves of my sedum spectabile Autumn Joy looked wilted. This was unusual because it is a plant that rarely needs water. Closer inspection showed

that the leaf edges had been webbed together and inside was a green caterpillar getting fatter by the minute. The closed leaves protect the insect from sprays so hand-picking is necessary. Watch for a black leafroller on silver foliaged plants, such as artemesia.

Another insect that is protected from sprays is the larvae of the spittlebug or froghopper. This nymph spends six to seven weeks enclosed in a froth of white spittle at the junction of a leaf and stem, sucking plant juices and causing stunted, dwarfed, weakened plants. Either squeeze the mass and the nymph to kill it or cut off the tip of the stem where it is located. Pinching back the tip growth will also promote bushiness and more bloom. Fall asters, chrysanthemums and other late blooming plants should have all growth tips cut back halfway by the first of July.

Aphids are particularly troublesome this year. Adults and their tiny pear-shaped young may be green, gray, white, orange or black and are almost always

found at the new growth tips. It is often recommended to use a strong stream of water to dislodge the pests - I only succeed in knocking over the plant. Much easier is running your fingers together along the stem and killing dozens at one stroke. You may wish to try a homemade all-purpose insect spray. Chop in a blender one garlic bulb and one small onion; add one teaspoon of powdered cayenne pepper and mix with one quart of water. Allow to steep for one hour and then strain through cheesecloth. Add one tablespoon of liquid dish soap. Wear rubber gloves while spraying plants thoroughly, keeping mixture away from your eyes and nose, since it could cause painful burning. This mixture may be stored covered in the refrigerator for up to a week.

The war against bugs will continue all season. Early detection is the best defense - it's easier to squish a few bugs than to halt an invasion. Remember to encourage the bug eaters - birds, toads, spiders, ladybugs and preying mantis. Even the hated earwig enjoys a meal of aphids.

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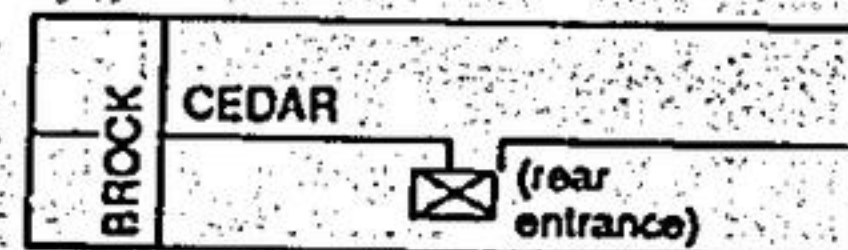
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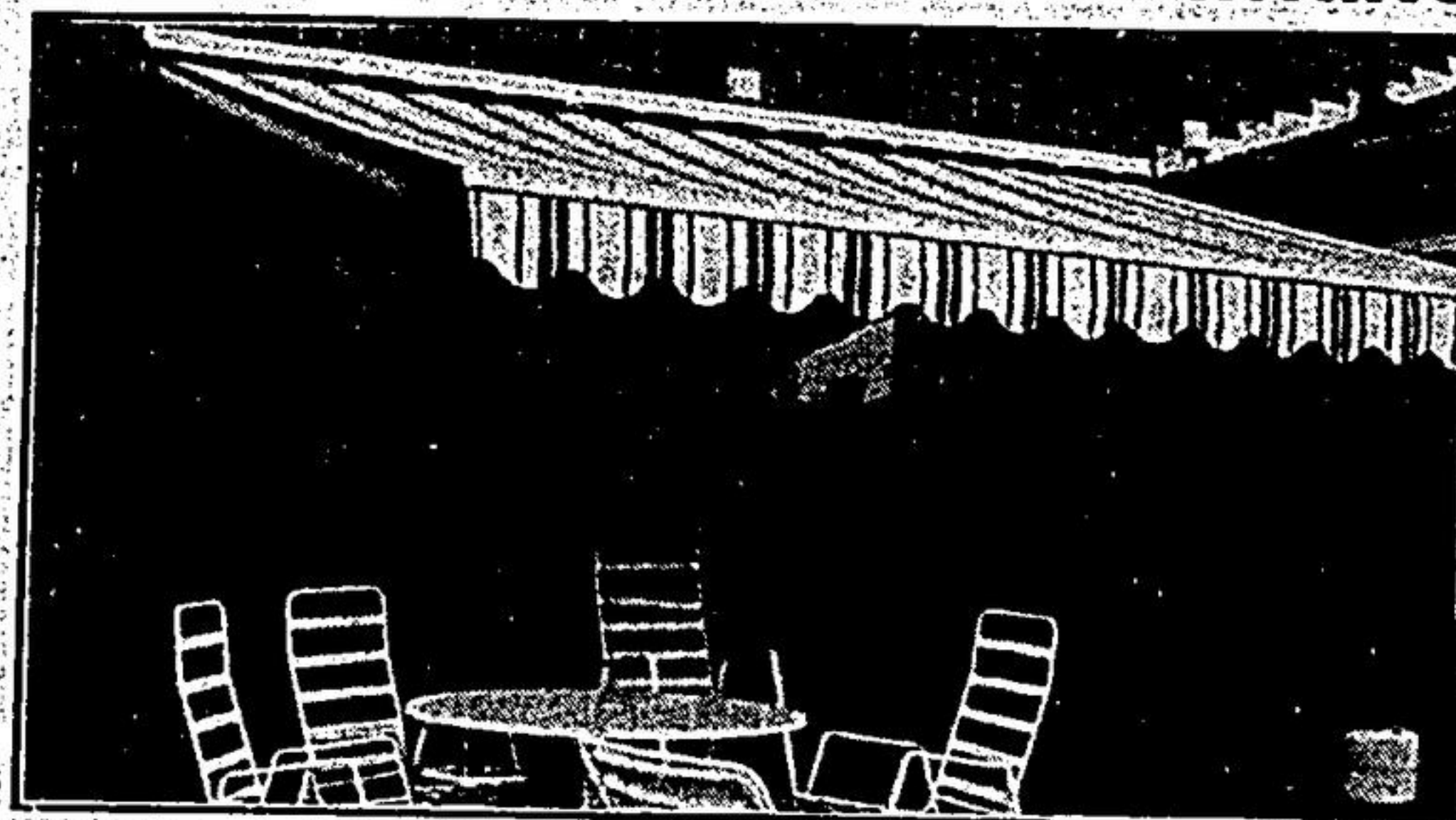


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