



MOTHRA VS. GODZILLA

If you're interested at all in gardening—even if it's just to the extent of reading articles like this—you're aware of Asian jumping worms. They're an invasive species of worm, causing incalculable damage as they strip soil of its nutrients, and my yard is heavily infested. In a discussion with the Connecticut Agricultural Experimental Station, I learned that even though birds and rodents generally avoid them, they do, in fact, have one enemy. It's another invasive, the hammerhead worm, and it's the stuff nightmares are made of: up to twenty centimeters long, with a flattened body and a head like that of a hammerhead shark. But, while jumping worms are vegetarians, taking nutrients from the soil, hammerheads eat other worms.

All I could think of was Mothra vs. Godzilla. Have you heard of this Japanese sci-fi classic? Its an epic battle between two monsters, one of which defeats the other, saving humankind.

So, apparently, we have a monster in our corner. Well, that's a bit of good news, I suppose, although, since the hammerhead is also invasive, who knows what other problems it brought with it? Caribbean plantation owners imported mongooses (yes, that's the plural. I looked it up.) to control the exploding sugar rat population, and now they have an exploded mongoose population instead. So we'll see how well the hammerheads work out.

Do you prefer horror films to sci-fi? If so, I have another gardening nightmare for you to consider. Dutifully following conservationists' advice, I had allowed plants to go wild around the rim of Someday Pond, to provide cover for wildlife. Unfortunately, I apparently provided a buffet for yet another Asian invasive, this time a parasite named dodder, nicknamed witch's hair, devil's guts, or most appropriately, the Vampire Plant. Do you know it? It looks like a cat took a skein of thin yarn, pulled it apart into tangled snarls, and spread it all over your plants. Dodder lacks chlorophyll, so it comes in several colors other than green. Mine is orange. Without chlorophyll, unable to perform photosynthesis, the 'yarn' winds itself around stems, piercing them and sucking out the sap.

The first invaders made themselves at home on the choicest plants: jewel weed, with its soft, juicy stems. Late arrivals had to settle for less desirable varieties with thinner, drier, harder-to-pierce stems. Less desirable to them, not to me: I'm resentfully pulling out the Joe-Pye weed just as it flowers, goldenrod as it starts to color, self-sown

vervain I was so pleased to welcome last year. It's tempting to start in the middle, where the infestation is thickest and I can get an illusion of progress grabbing a big armful all at once. But it's smarter to pull from around the edges, where the dodder is scarcer and harder to see, but poised to spread out. I resist temptation. Sometimes.

There is no Mothra to defeat this monster. My only weapons are new pruning shears and more patience than I ever thought I could muster. None of our native birds or small animals will eat it. I can't blame them for being reluctant to try unfamiliar foods, because I'm just as unwilling: Crickets may be the sustainable protein of the future, but nothing will induce me to taste one.

Since it's only around the pond's perimeter—so far, anyway—I suspect it hitched a ride from upstream. It can't go any farther in the water, since the pond is at its usual midsummer low, below the overflow pipe, but that doesn't mean it can't travel in a breeze, or on my hands, or even on the sole of my boots. However careful I am, I will miss bits. And anyway, seeds can lurk, dormant, for up to thirty years, so I'll probably be battling dodder for years to come, along with the bittersweet, the barberry, the mile-a-minute, the knotweed, the English ivy. For today, though, it's an hour or two by the pond, a tick check, and a shower. Wash off my boots and disinfect the shears. Try again tomorrow, before it gets too hot.

I realize this isn't my usual cheerful article, but it would be dishonest to pretend that gardening is all roses and no thorns.

And just when I thought I was coming to terms with this new-to-me challenge, I heard that yet another harmful invasive insect, the spotted lanternfly, has been found just around the corner. To report sightings and find advice on controlling the bugs, visit portal.ct.gov/caes/caps/caps/spotted-lanternfly---slf. That's the website of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, where dedicated scientists are working hard to find solutions for these very difficult problems. Mothra, where are you when we need you?