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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, July 15, 1941

QUESTION BOX

Sand fleas are mythical.
What insect feeds on ham?
Moth balls in pockets.
Will attic heat kill moths?

Answers from entomologists
of the U. S. Department
of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

The letters this last week have asked so many questions about insect pests that today we're going to give the insects the floor, so to speak. All the questions today are about insects. And we're going to call on entomologists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture for the answers.

The first letter asks about an insect that doesn't exist. The letter comes from the mother of two small children. She writes: "Can you tell me how to treat the sand in the children's sandpile so fleas will not breed there? Last summer the children were bothered a great deal by bites from sand-fleas."

The entomologists say there's no such insect as a true sand-flea that breeds in sand and does not live on any animal or bird. All fleas require blood to live. So instead of treating the sandpile to get rid of fleas, better look to the children's dog or cat. The chances are that the fleas are coming from the family pet.

The entomologists say you can rid a dog or cat of fleas easily by dusting derris powder, cubé powder or pyrethrum powder in the fur. These powders kill the fleas and don't hurt your pet. Rub the powder into the hair along the back from head to tail. If your drug store, or seed store, or poultry-supply shop doesn't carry derris powder, ask for some brand of flea powder that contains derris.

Fleas that get into the house in summertime can be traced to your cat or dog too. An animal that sleeps in the house is very likely to bring in fleas. Flea eggs laid in the animal's fur roll out on the floor and hatch in cracks and crevices. Soon a swarm of hungry young fleas is ready to feast on you or your dog or cat.

Once fleas get in the house, you can fight them with naphthalene flakes, the same flakes you use against clothes moths. Use about 5 pounds of flakes for the average-sized room. Sprinkle the flakes over the floor. Close the room up tight. Close all doors and windows. And let the room stand undisturbed for 48 hours. Then brush up the flakes and use them, if you need to, in another room. The flakes evaporate and give off fumes or gas that kill the fleas. If only a few fleas are present they can be destroyed by the use of a good fly spray rather than by using naphthalene flakes.

Of course, frequent cleaning, and especially vacuum cleaning, of the floor and rugs takes up the flea eggs before they have time to hatch. But a house that is closed for some weeks in summer while you're on vacation gives the flea eggs a fine chance to hatch and give you a lively welcome on your return.

By the way, if you want full facts about fleas, you are welcome to a Department of Agriculture leaflet about them. The leaflet is called "How to Control Fleas". It is No. 152. And you get it by writing to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. As long as the free supply lasts, you are welcome to this leaflet.

From fleas, let's turn to a question about "A brown, hairy bug, about a half inch long," that has been eating ham and bacon. A worried housewife says: "Can you tell me what insect is in our home-cured ham and bacon, and what we can do to get rid of it? The insect is a brown, hairy bug, about half an inch long. I noticed 2 short, curved stiff spines on the back. These insects are burrowing into the fat of our hams and are also in the bacon."

The entomologists say the insect described is the grub or larva of the larder beetle. The beetles fly into the house in May or June and look around for food where they can lay their eggs. Often they lay the eggs in cracks and crevices around the pantry. Then, when the eggs hatch into the hairy grubs, they are near food. These insects prefer the fatty part of the ham to the lean, but sooner or later eat into the lean meat.

To protect cured meat from the larder beetle, put the meat in bags as early as possible after curing, and wrap it with great care. If the least crack or opening is left, the insects will be able to get in.

Thorough smoking helps also to protect the meat. But once the insects get into the meat, the only thing to do is to cut away the infested part and burn it. Then clean and fumigate, or spray the room where you keep the meat. Here again prevention is better than cure. When feasible, keep hams and bacon in closets constructed of fine copper wire screening or keep smoke houses well screened. When you first see the black beetles in the spring, catch and kill as many of them as possible. Then they'll lay no eggs in your larder, and you'll have no trouble with these hungry grubs.

Last question: "Please tell me why my coat was eaten by moths. I was careful to fill all the pockets with moth balls."

The entomologists say a few mothballs in pockets are no protection against moths. You have to use enough mothballs or flakes so that their fumes will completely surround the garment. That is why you must use mothballs or flakes in a tightly closed box, or trunk, or closet, and use plenty of flakes around them so the fumes will penetrate every part of the garment.

Last question: "Is it true that extreme heat will kill clothes moths? We have a very hot attic. Would the heat there protect clothes?"

The answer is: Yes, a temperature as high as 120 to 128 degrees Fahrenheit will kill clothes moths, and larvae, and eggs. Just 6 to 11 minutes of this high heat will kill eggs and larvae, but the garments must be thoroughly heated through to this temperature range. But though the heat of your attic might kill moths, would it be good for your clothes? Neither fur nor wool will stand a great deal of continuous heat without damage.

That's all the questions for today.

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