

6-28-19 Back Yard Adventures

Is there anything worse than waiting for news about your child? While waiting and praying for good news on a very serious health problem, it was important to keep busy. The yard needed mowing and gave me that mental health saving opportunity to do just that; keep busy and keep my mind off worries.

Shortly after beginning the mowing, I realized the pacing and listening to music had allowed my breathing to slow and my mind to be in a better state. My senses returned, my actual senses, for in the stress mode, they shut down. I began to enjoy the bird songs, the colors of the flowers and the smell of freshly cut grass. I noticed some small dots on a small yellow flower; a weed that I ordinarily would mow down. I bent down and looked closer. They were three small winged insects busily eating pollen, or so it seemed. I took a picture of them and mowed around that flower, for no matter what they were, I considered them pollinators. We need pollinators!

The mowing continued, of the grass only, leaving the white clover alone. White clover stays short and green and has lots of flowers. It falls in my “Very Good” category.

A picture of the little insects resembling tiny hornets, was sent off by text to an entomologist friend. It is nice to have a variety of friends, with a variety of interests. She was happy to reply and informed they were flies called Hover flies, flower flies or Syrphids. In the picture you can clearly see the halteres. Instead of 2 pairs of wings, the flies have 1 pair and halteres. These are the little white knobs in picture. They act as gyroscopes for flight.

Gyroscopes? How wild and cool! Later, I enjoyed reading about these insects with their amazing flight capabilities. Engineers are studying them to gain knowledge to help create better wings for helicopters, turbines, and nano drones.

The larvae of the Hover flies are beneficial also. These small legless larvae feed upon aphids as well as thrips and small caterpillars. Larvae extract the fluids from the aphids and leave the exoskeleton behind.

I could have used some of those last week, when I found aphids on a plant. Oh, well, nice to know that I have aphid eaters on the way.

Yard work is full of distractions. That was okay, for this was a day when distractions were welcomed. The invasives called and I answered! Out came piles of bittersweet and multiflora roses. It is and will be a forever job to maintain the progress. As soon I look away, they start growing again. I pulled out a lot of roots, though!

Battling invasive plants is important for many reasons. They choke out and kill trees. They remove and prevent biodiversity wherever they grow. Oftentimes, they offer nothing, such as flowers important to pollinators. Lack of biodiversity in plants leads to lack of biodiversity in animals and insects.

They create another problem, too. They are responsible for the over-use of herbicides, like glyphosates, better known as Roundup. It is not only toxic to plants; it is toxic to us. Of course, we can't really blame the plant for the use of toxic chemicals; it is people who choose to use them. On a small scale, the non-toxic method is to pull out the roots. Black plastic can also be used to kill plants. Once dead and dried out, plants can be composted. Try to get plants like bittersweet out before they grow berries. Birds love them and the berries are deposited elsewhere, giving the gift that keeps growing.

My backyard adventure also included finding a tired and sick looking white footed mouse. I don't care for mice, but I hate to see an animal suffer. I could not help but wonder if he had eaten rodenticide somewhere. When people buy "bait stations" they are being lulled into a passive state of mind by the word "bait", as opposed to "poison". It is really a poison station. The poison is an anticoagulant, delivering not only a torturous death to the rodent, but also killing raptors when they eat the poisoned but still moving mouse or rat. Cats, dogs and sometimes children are harmed by rodenticides also.

While spreading the word on rodenticides is a passion of mine, so isn't the topic of tick-borne diseases and white footed mice help spread them! So, if you are trying to reduce the mouse population, good old-fashioned traps serve to monitor and to reduce the population. They are inexpensive, can be re-used and they are chemical free.

I took close-up pictures of the mouse and was pleased that I did not see any ticks on it.

It was a challenging day assisted by challenges that could be met by mowing grass, saving flowers and pollinators, learning new and fascinating information and

ripping out the roots of invasive plants. You will never see one of those little signs on my lawn, warning pets and children to stay off. Poisoning wildlife and worrying about our children are not adventures at all.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org