

## Cultivating Pests: A Lesson in Civilization

by Tracy Moncrief Mounts ©2000

Some husbands look at porn on the Internet.

Some husbands lurk in chat rooms, pretending they are 23 year old Dot Com millionaire body builders.

Some husbands spend hours on ESPN.com, arguing with other football obsessed people over whether Steve Young or Joe Montana was the better quarterback, considering Steve set a record for best rushing quarterback of all times, despite only winning 1 Superbowl to Joe's 4.

Does my own dear husband engage in any of these typical husbandly diversions whilst on the Internet? Nope.

My husband orders bugs.

Yes, you heard right—bugs. No porn, chats, message boards, or other nonsense for my husband.

Just bugs.

It started out normally, just a little trouble with the houseplants. Being People Of Unusually Good Taste, we enjoy highly fragrant exotic houseplants with sexy names. Plants like *Gardina jasminoides*, *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Plumeria rubra* x. Plants which would waft temperate scents when we cranked the heat up to 74 degrees. Soon we were considering replacing our hardwood floors with sand and add sun lamps to the picture rail. Basically we were trying to recreate the South Pacific in our gloomy Seattle living room.

Problems arose during our second year of garden-palooza. Having solved the mystery of the non-blooming plants (they needed a grow light, in Seattle, who can blame them?) We were

up to our elbows in fertilizer. I, having a gangrene thumb, left matters of horticulture to hubby, who had a vast teenaged history of growing plants in his closet. I myself had only a history of consuming already-picked plants, usually not by choice, but by Maternal Nutritional Suggestion (though I still fail to see the value of what my dad called “green cardboard,” or iceberg lettuce).

Anyway, back to the bugs. The gardenia started it. Sure it looked pretty and green, but lurking not-so-innocently in that plant was an infestation. Soon (the slut) it had spread around to the other plants—spider mites, the black plague for plants.

Being of regular-type vision, and being even less of an expert on bugs as I am on plants (with the addition that I like them slightly less, the way an ant is slightly less than a metric ton), I took hubby’s word for it.

“Okay,” I said, apparently not appreciating the seriousness of bugs I couldn’t see.

“They’re like plant vampires,” he said impatiently.

“I’ll get some garlic,” I suggested, trying to be helpful.

“Tried that, didn’t work,” he shot back, indicating the value he placed on my horticultural advice.

“So what do we do? They don’t attack people, do they?” I stepped back anxiously. I am particularly not fond of anything with the word “spider” in it.

He looked at me as though I’d just dropped a chunk of my cerebral cortex on the coffee table. Okay, apparently not.

Three weeks later he’d run the gamut on cures, spraying alcohol on the leaves until I started having dreams of swabs and nurses and scary-looking medical devices. He tried two different types of pesticide (one stank up the house, the other he insisted was so toxic, he threw me

and the kids out of the house while he mixed it. Personally I think he was just sick of us scrunching our noses at his pesticides). Nothing had changed, or so he said.

The spider mites thrived. They multiplied. They joined the local YMCA. Just as they began planting shrubbery around their yards and hanging curtains (though I thought the bright flowered print a bit much in our living room), my husband pointed and clicked on a new solution.

He bought more bugs.

The theory, as he explained it to me, is that the new bugs would devour the old bugs. Cannibal spider mites, apparently.

“What if they eat the plant instead?” I asked.

Apparently just then another chunk of my brain fell out, as best as I could tell from the look he was giving me.

“They only eat other spider mites,” he explained with the patience he usually reserves for our 4-year-old.

“But what about the plant?” I persist.

“After the new spider mites eat the old ones, they die,” he explained.

I began to worry about our cannibalistic slaves. What if they’d seen Norma Rae? What if they formed a union?

My husband went on to explain how they would only be bred after we had ordered them, then sent overnight with a refrigerator pack. Arrive they did, cool as a cucumber. We spread them around our infested plants, wishing them each “Bon Appetit.”

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A week later my husband has spent part of every day peering through a magnifying glass at the plants.

“Playing with your bugs?” I asked. “Can’t you see them?”

“Well the new bugs are red,” he explained. “They’re bigger than the other spider mites and so far it doesn’t look like there are fewer of the black kind.”

Oh. Wonderful. Now we had twice as many bugs. Well maybe they could have interracial mixers or something.

“You see,” he went on to explain, just as if I was interested, “in a predatory situation, there is an ideal ratio of predators to prey. They simply aren’t hungry enough to devour all of them at once, it’ll take a while.”

Uh huh.

I began flipping through the psychological help section of our insurance guide.

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Two more weeks passed. One morning I caught my husband peering at the leaves again.

“Any progress?” I asked, trying to be helpful.

“Well, I think they’ve been rounding the small mites up.” I made a move toward the phone. “You mean,” I asked in my most calm we’re-all-sane-here voice, “They are having a bug rodeo?”

His eyes shifted guiltily. “I think they are just eating enough to stay fed, and keeping the others rounded up for future consumption.”

“Let me know who wins the rope-off.”

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A month later I caught him looking with that magnifier.

“Do we have a winner?” I asked.

“Hmm,” he said, looking guilty. “The good bugs raped and pillaged the bad bug villages, and then they starved.”

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Pressing aside the guilt of participating in insect enslavement, I’ve decided to give my hubby a new hobby. I’m e-mailing him some pornsites and the URL for the chat room from ESPN.com. I’m pretty sure it won’t help; the other day I caught him looking up mail-order earthworms for the garden.