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The beetles are on a roll. They will now bail out India by weeding out its imported problem: the stubborn parthenium

A bug goes down to the root of the problem

LAB REPORT

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FOR long India has been fighting a losing battle against parthenium, the weed that accompanied imported wheat and became a parasite that never went away. Now an exterminator has been found: the beetle.

Says Dr N.T. Yaduraju, director of the Jabalpur-based Na-

tional Research Centre for Weed Science (NRCWS), "We have now found an effective weapon to fight parthenium. We have got about two lakh imported Mexican beetles in the last three years. This insect eats up the leaves of the parthenium and does not harm any other crop. We are multiplying these insects and distributing them through our 22 centres spread across the country. We have also distributed them to about 150 out of 400 Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK)."

But he admits the biological



control method through the Mexican Beetle (*Zygogramma bicolorata*) is likely to be slow. Hence this programme needs to be integrated with plantation of suitable competitive plants available locally like Cassia tora (Chakada) and C seresia. These plants would suppress the parthenium spread, he says.

The parthenium weed was first detected in 1956 in Pune. It then spread to all parts of the country, reaching even the Northeast, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshadweep. Called Gajar Ghas or car-

rot grass, it's also known as Congress weed—a reminder of its entry into the country along with wheat imports under the Congress rule.

Apart from sucking useful nutrient from the crop fields, parthenium is known to cause diseases like asthma, allergy and skin disorders. Air borne pollen may cause severe allergic rhinitis in some people. While the farmer has been tackling the weed by spraying his fields, its spread in areas that are not under cultivation has become a cause for con-

cern, says Yaduraju.

He adds that the NRCWS has also discovered some use in the otherwise useless parthenium. Stems of this plant are being used to prepared wooden laminates. Both its leaves and stem can be used for preparing green manure by mixing it with cow dung. Parthenium, he says, is also being used as a medicinal plant in different parts of the world. Every year NRCWS launches a Parthenium Awareness week beginning August 26 to September 1.

Apart from the deadly parthenium, there are other exotic and unwelcome weeds that have entered the country like Mile-a-Minute and Chor-molina.