

a lunch of aphids

If you see a ladybug flying away home late some afternoon, chances are she's just put in a good day's work for a farmer somewhere.

She may also have done her bit in keeping down the price you pay for the food and fiber that the farmer produces.

It's really not as far-fetched as it sounds, because the ladybug is one of a growing number of insects scientists have recruited to help man in his continued battle against bugs. Ladybugs are known as beneficial insects because—pregnant or not—they have a craving for aphids, the voracious little pests that suck away millions of dollars worth of crop plants each year in the United States.

Released in a farm field or a garden, ladybugs will track down aphids and devour them on the spot. Aphid-hungry ladybugs—spawned for this specific purpose—are currently being mass-produced in insect maternity wards and sold to farmers or gardeners by the gallon.

Besides the ladybug, the army of beneficial insects includes more than 200 other friendly helpers.

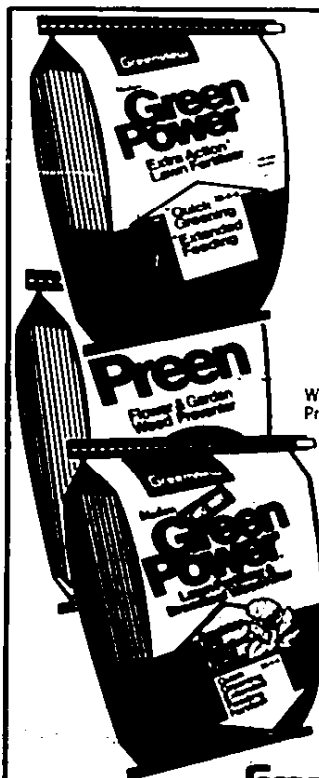
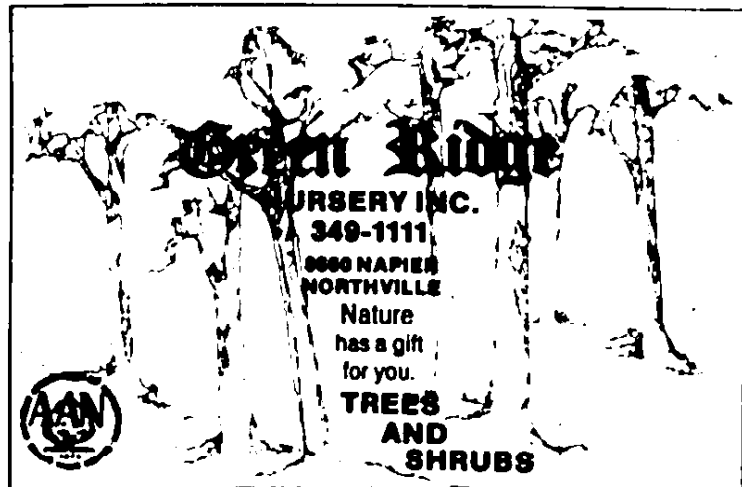
Out in California, reports the National Cotton Council, a tiny wasp with the long name of trichogramma is waging war on a dozen different pests that damage a variety of crops from cotton to corn. One firm produces 20 million of the wasp eggs each day to carry on its thriving mail-order bug business.

Over 125,000 eggs are attached to a single card that's mailed in an envelope to farmers ordering them. Farmers cut the cards into one-inch squares and distribute them in their pest-ridden crops. A week later, the wasps start hatching and going about their business of bringing the bad bugs under control.

Using good bugs to fight bad ones isn't a new idea. As a matter of fact, an Australian relative of the American ladybug was this country's first heroine in the bug vs. bug battle.

Known as the vedalia beetle, she was imported back in the 1880's to fight the cotton cushiony scale, a pest that had invaded California citrus.

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