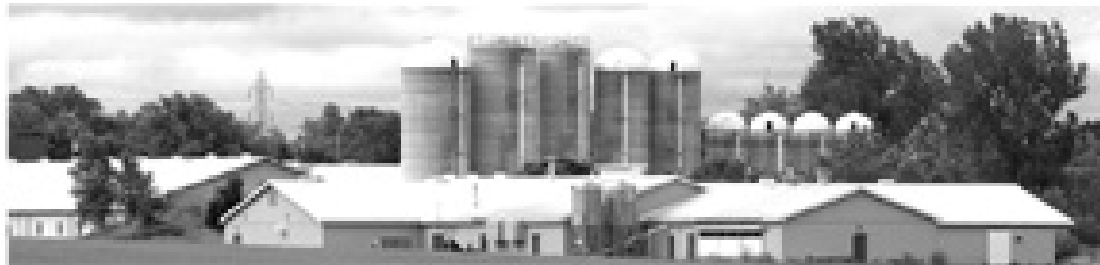


Macdonald



Reports



Grubs, racoons and lawns, oh my!

By Mel Lefebvre and
Christie-Anna Lovat
UNIS



Christie-Anna Lovat (left), a final-year student in Botanical Sciences, and Mel Lefebvre, a final-year student in Biodiversity & Conservation (McGill School of Environment), are manning the UNIS phone lines this year.

What do you do when your kitchen is overrun by ants, or when your spruce tree's needles suddenly turn red? What if you can't get to your garden equipment because a family of skunks lives there, or a baby bird is lying helpless on your lawn? Or what if you want to start composting, but you're not sure how that pile of kitchen garbage magically becomes fertile soil? Well, for this information and more, you can call the Urban Nature Information Service (UNIS). UNIS is a free, student-run service offered on the Macdonald campus, and we're here to answer questions related to horticulture, wildlife, and green living.

For the past 20 years, McGill students have offered high quality guidance to callers with a wide range of environmentally-related problems. Formerly the Horticultural Information Centre (HIC) and the Wildlife Information Centre (WIC), the two were combined into UNIS in 2001 with the objective to increase the quality of the service to our clientele. We function completely on donations, and are not-for-profit, which means that we are able to offer donors a charitable receipt. We are here, purely and simply, to field the hundreds of calls that come into our campus each summer from the general public on matters relating to

horticultural and wildlife issues. In the process, we do our best to help urban residents live in harmony with nature.

At UNIS we actively promote methods for coexisting with urban wildlife because when it comes to wildlife, there are no easy answers. Oftentimes, the animals that we encounter in or around our homes are just looking for food and shelter, and the last thing they want is to encounter humans. Unfortunately, as we increase our urban areas, we make the living conditions worse for the animals and ourselves in the long run. Small patches of forests left in urban regions are no longer able to support

wildlife populations, and that's when you get families of raccoons making the crawl space under your porch their home. To prevent critters from taking residence on your property, it is important to make sure your garbage is sealed tightly, and that little spaces where they can get into your home are well blocked up. When doing any sort of roof work, make sure there are no nests of any kind. If babies such as squirrels or raccoons are blocked off from their parents for too long, they won't survive. Plus, you'll have to deal with angry parents who will try their hardest to get back to them, potentially harming your property more than the original damage you were

repairing in the first place!

UNIS also deals with a lot of horticultural questions, and obtained its origins from the farming roots of the Macdonald Campus. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and the key to prevention is knowledge, which is what we practice when it comes to plant pests and diseases. Many plant diseases, such as black knot on cherry and plum trees, and even white grubs, can be significantly reduced or even eliminated, if the proper preventative methods are followed. For instance, new organic lawn care techniques for promoting healthy root systems in your lawn go a long way to making

your grass less appealing to white grubs. As well, a little research into which plum or cherry cultivars are resistant to the black knot disease can save you a world of headache later on.

In addition to handling public inquiries about urban wildlife and horticulture, we have begun expanding our expertise to green living habits. 2008 marks our first year of community outreach. We are collaborating with the city of Terrasse-Vaudreuil on a pilot project to educate citizens on proper lawn care techniques, recycling, and composting methods. Terrasse-Vaudreuil is seeking to expand their municipal services, and we have been invited to provide guidance in ensuring they are carried through sustainably and with environmentally friendly options. We may be looking to expand this aspect of UNIS to other municipalities if our trial run with Terrasse-Vaudreuil is a success.

Working for UNIS is a challenging and enriching job. As students of McGill University, we are put to the test in answering some time-sensitive questions, such as what to do with baby animals, or proper long-term preventative techniques, such as organic lawn care. All in all, this service which acts like a giant switchboard, connecting problems with their solutions, is a very satisfying line of work to be engaged in.

Some Frequently Asked Questions

Below are a few of our most frequently asked questions. For more information, please contact UNIS at 514-398-7882.

1. WHAT'S THIS WHITE WORM IN MY LAWN?

What you're probably dealing with is a beetle grub, or 'white grub'. They're the larval stages of three different beetle species; two are invasive and one is our own common June beetle. The white grub has become a real problem recently, since the ban of pesticides that are needed to control their numbers. This has left many lawns defenceless while the white grubs overtake their roots. There are alternative methods of control, which, if applied thoroughly and consistently, can bring the grub population in your lawn down to a manageable level. Lawn care of the future won't be about eliminating the problem, but in finding a method for making the problem manageable. A good source of information on the white grubs can be found at www.cap-quebec.com/insectes.php?Lang=en#white or at www.eap.mcgill.ca/AgroBio/ab360-06.htm (in French only).

2. HELP! I CAN HEAR A BABY ANIMAL IN MY HOUSE.

This is the time of year for baby animals of every kind. When dealing with babies, never simply seal them off. Most mother animals will frantically destroy your house in an attempt to reach their babies, and if the babies die they can create quite a smell in your house. The best method is professional animal removal. We can recommend a well-regarded company that guarantees their work for a minimum of 3 years, and has been in business for over 20. We are authorized to refer clients; contact us for a referral.

3. THERE ARE BABY DUCKS IN MY SWIMMING POOL. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

What you probably have are Mallard ducklings, as Mallards seem to be capable of setting up a nest anywhere, regardless of human presence. The most important thing to remember with baby ducklings is that, despite being ducks, they are actually very bad swimmers at first, and will drown in your swimming pool if left without a way out. You can provide this by raising the water level in your pool until it's level with the side, or by placing floating platforms in the pool. Ducklings can also easily be scooped out with a

pool skimmer. If you're not interested in sharing your pool with a dozen noisy ducklings, you can move them. Simply locate a nearby body of water (parks are great), collect the ducklings in a box, and walk slowly to that body of water. The mother will follow you to the new site and remain there with her ducklings.

4. THERE ARE ANTS IN MY KITCHEN. SHOULD I BE WORRIED?

Not necessarily. At this time of year many ant colonies outdoors are sending ants indoors in search of food. Usually a few ant traps can take care of these scouts. However if you start to see winged ants in your house, especially in January, you could have a serious infestation. Ant colonies take three to five years to become reproductively active, at which time the colony releases winged ants to reproduce. Typically, they do this in summer. However if you have a colony in your house, you may see winged ants around January; many winged ants would suggest that you have a thriving colony in your walls protected from the effects of winter. Depending on the species, there may be structural damage. Contact a reliable exterminator right away.