

ANCESTORAL ANSWERS TO PESKY PROBLEMS



How did the ancestors deal with the pesky problem of bugs? As you probably know, the simple answer is plants – including leaves, seeds and roots. But methods differed from place to place depending on what was available.

In many cases, fragrant oils from the leaves of plants like mint and eucalyptus were applied directly to skin to deter insects. In other cases, roots from plants like goldenseal were ground into powder, combined with greasy animal fats, and spread onto the skin. Compounds from the goldenseal repelled insects and the animal fats made it easier to apply the goldenseal powder and allowed it to remain on the skin longer. Interestingly, applying animal fats also served to protect ancestors from sunburn! (This method is probably what the professor was thinking of when he said ancestral Floridians used rotting fish to repel insects – except it was more likely that they used oil from fish combined with local plant materials.)



Ancestors also went to the source of the problem. Controlled burns helped to clear underbrush where many insects breed, which was also an effective method of driving off venomous snakes. This helped to reduce insect (and snake) populations around villages, camps, and gardens.



As with the other examples from this year's Seminole History of the Month series, these methods were appropriated by colonizers who struggled to adapt to the conditions they encountered. What's more interesting about this case, however, is that colonizers initially reacted to the methods with disgust and ridiculed ancestors for the practices, suggesting they were unclean (even though colonizers were known for poor personal hygiene, as records from the time indicate). Of course, it wasn't long before colonizers stole the ancestor's methods of repelling insects and added them to their own routines.

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Top: An *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, Photo by Joao Paulo Burini via Getty Images

Middle: *Hydratis canadensis*, Goldenseal, was used as protection.
Photo by Lonnie Galt-Theis

Bottom: A controlled burn through Everglades sawgrass.
Photo by Michael Gue, NPS

