

REVENGE OF THE SAP SUCKERS: AMBRA SANCIN

I watched as the gardener removed my 30-year-old mandarin tree from its corner spot in the garden.

Riddled with borers and citrus leaf-miners, it had to go. I'd rescued it from neglect in my parents' yard and it had given me a bounty of crops over the years.

I'd perfected marmalade and experimented with vodka-based liqueur, relishes and gelati. Friends looked forward to my citrus-time dinner parties where mandarins featured in every course.

I snapped back to reality, remembering the yearly battles with the scourge of all citrus growers: the bronze orange bug, also known as the stink beetle.

These unwelcome sap suckers appeared in spring and attacked the tree's young shoots. As they changed from an attractive bronze colour to black when fully grown, their shield-shaped armour become tougher.

Whacking them into semi-consciousness with a broom and stomping on them was too hard. And sucking them into a vacuum cleaner was impractical. I resorted to squirting them with pest oil, before watching them fall into a bucket of soapy water. There, take that!

But some don't go quietly and display a cross-eyed, revengeful, don't-mess-with-me look after the spray.

They got their revenge by swooping towards my head like kamikaze pilots before their final descent. During this bit of drama, they enjoyed emitting an acrid smell. I began wearing goggles to protect my eyes from the harmful squirt and held my breath.

These scenes came to a nadir after a full day's session at the killing fields. Someone sitting behind me on the bus tapped my shoulder.

'Excuse me, not sure if you're aware, but there's a large bug on your head.'

I froze. To swat or not to swat. I hoped to scare away the pest by imitating a helicopter, arms flailing in the air. The stink beetle took flight after releasing its putrid stench. Red-faced with embarrassment, I jumped off the bus before my destination, hoping to preserve my dignity by pretending to answer a phone call.

I had no time to warn others about the creature before leaping off the bus and left them to deal with the *Halyomorpha halys*.

In the film 'The Outlaw Josey Wales', Clint Eastwood chews tobacco and spits on all manner of things, including a dog and a beetle, when he's mad and seeking revenge. I considered this tactic for a while, but although I despised the bugs, I didn't need to embrace a new vice to prove my gardening skills.