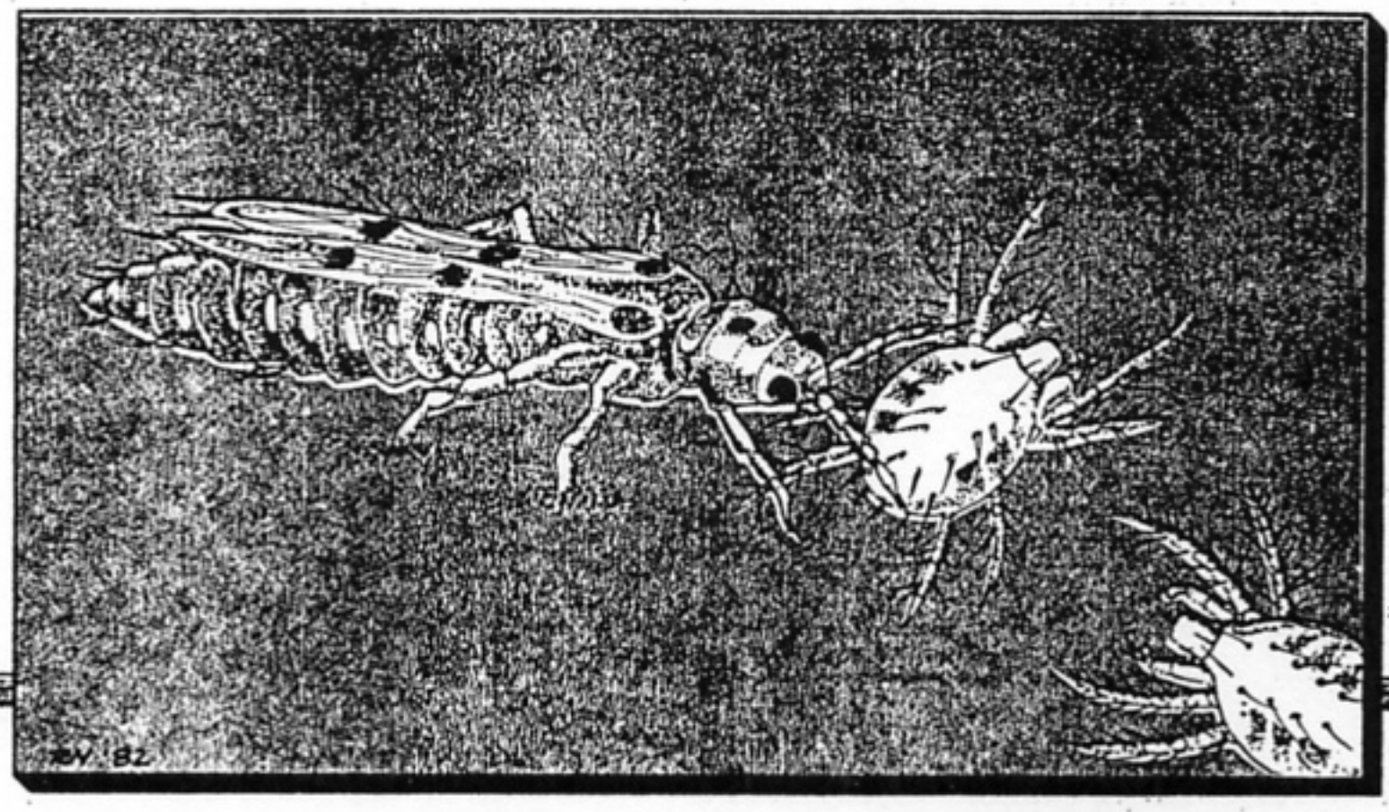
Mites take beating in bio warfare



Six-spotted thrips are tigers when it comes to battling spider mites.

Andreas, a Delano-area mer, takes a look at how ne of his "organic" raisins drying. He had about 50 cent of his crop rolled when rains hit early Friday ning.

Story and Photos
By RON GOBLE

For many years farmers have been caught-up in the seemingly endless chemical battle to control the prolific spider mite — a tiny pest which thrives in the hot, dry and dusty grape vineyards and almond orchards of the San Joaquin Valley.

The major weapon in the grower's arsenal has been a handful of potent and expensive chemicals. Now, however, there is an alternative.

With the costs of doing business getting higher and higher, farmers are looking for ways of saving on expenses. That is why the rules of the insect battle are changing. There is a different kind of war going on today.

This fight is between the pesky mites and a *natural* enemy, commonly known as the six-spotted thrips (Scolothrips sexmaculatus).

A number of almond growers are turning away from what they considered a routine chemical spray program, and are choosing to call in an army of six-spotted thrips instead.

Farmers spend thousands of dollars every year on chemicals in what has been a in many cases a losing battle against Pacific mite (Tetranychus pacificus) and two-spotted mite, (Tetranychus urticae). Each year the costs climb higher and the resistance of the pest increases.

These insect pests can cause extensive damage to trees and vines.

"Even with increased applications and costs, the mite has not been combated effectively. Mite populations are aggravated by sprays for other pests like navel orangeworms (NOW) in the almonds and leafhopper in the grapes," said Ibrahim F. Michael, an agricultural consultant who operates his own pest management firm based in Fresno.

Michael has developed special programs to control the mites by using cultural and biological means, leaving the chemicals as a "last resort" and then only on a spot treatment basis.

"I haven't sprayed my almond trees in 10 years," declared longtime Clovis almond grower, Frank Sorrenti. "We ran a test block with Dr. Michael way back then, and to be honest, I thought at the time it would be a big flop. But it wasn't. We did what he said and it worked.

"I haven't had to fire up a spray rig since then and that has saved us a lot in production costs over the years," Sorrenti declared.

Sorrenti is no newcomer to almond growing. His father, Robert, started in the business back in 1926. Today Frank farms 150 acres of almonds and some acreage of other crops too. In addition, Sorrenti has an almond hulling operation.

"Growers always give me their worst trees or vines to work on," Michael said with a grin. "But that doesn't matter as long as they are committed to the program."

Michael explained that it is tough on a grower to change his way of thinking. They see some mite activity in their orchard and begin to "get nervous" and want to go back to the old comfortable chemical approach.

"We start from ground zero and a grower must be

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Ibrahim Michael is surrounded by bean plants for rearing beneficial six-spotted thrips used to fight mite.

gain foothold in San Joaquin Valley