

Beneficial Insects

Bugs you've got to love | By Nancy Crowe

Some insects do wonders at keeping the population (and destructive power) of other insects under control. They help maintain nature's balance, and you enjoy more of your garden's beauty and bounty.

Here are just a few you'd be wise to welcome rather than squish, spray or ban.

PRAYING MANTIS

Don't let the reverent pose fool you. The 2-inch praying mantis will eat anything smaller than it, said Purdue Advanced Master Gardener Penny Alles, a plant diagnostic specialist with expertise in all things bug. These ambush hunters wait for their prey, and if pickings are slim they

move to another spot. All they need is a sturdy branch or tall plant for their egg sacs, which are numerous in our area.

But leave them where you find them, advised Alles, who many years ago found a praying mantis egg sac on a walking path. Fearing it would get stepped on, she brought it into her greenhouse. "I thought I had enough insects in there for them to live, but I didn't, and they ate each other. It was horrible," she recalled.

Praying mantises can be purchased, she said, but make sure you get the native Carolina (Stagmomantis carolina) mantis and not the Chinese mantis, which won't fare well in northeast Indiana.

DRAGONFLY

Lake people often see beautifully colored dragonflies, and they should be welcome anywhere. "If you have dragonflies, this is a sign of a healthy ecosystem," said Alles. (And they don't sting.)

They can eat their weight in mosquitoes in a day, she said. They also like Japanese beetles, a pest that can frustrate homeowners to the point of using sprays that kill all insects—including the beneficial ones.

For non-lakeside homes, attracting them may mean adding a water feature, said Alles. "They can live from six to 10 years, so having a little colony would be beneficial. They're also a good food



A young praying mantis.

PHOTO BY PENNY ALLES

source for birds, another beneficial predator you should have in your landscape."

PARASITIC WASP

If you find a tomato hornworm with little rice-like attachments on its back, let it be, said Alles. They're parasitic wasp pupae and they're doing their job.

Parasitic wasps lay eggs on the bodies of pests such as

the tomato hornworm. When the eggs hatch, the larvae consume the host from the inside, according to Purdue University's Department of Entomology. When the host dies, the tiny (less than 1/50 inch) wasps emerge to seek another host. They also like aphids, loopers, sawflies, tent caterpillars, true bugs, leafhoppers, scale, thrips, beetles and more.

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A bee visits a tree peony.

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Adult parasitic wasps eat pollen and nectar, so if you're keeping bees and butterflies happy, parasitic wasps will also benefit. Fennel, dill, rosemary and lavender are good choices, according to the University of North Carolina Extension.

LADYBUG

Know the difference between the ladybug (*Hippodamia convergens*) and the Asian lady beetle, which is no lady when it comes to invading homes. The ladybug is red with a solid black head. If you see an M-like shape on the head, it's an Asian lady beetle.

Ladybugs are voracious consumers of aphids, which do great damage to farms and gardens. A ladybug could eat 5,000 aphids in its lifetime, said Alles. They'll also eat scale and mealybugs.

Ladybugs can be ordered online or by mail, but again: Work with a reputable mer-

chant and know what you're really getting.

HONEY BEES

Honey bees power the world through pollination; no bees, no us. Though they generally will not sting unless provoked, they are still feared.

"If they're flying around your flowers, they're out there doing their work," said Alles; let them be.

Homeowners must decide whether to use aggressive and toxic measures to solve bee problems, said Alles, who gives presentations on pest control. "But it has an impact. Everybody leaves their print on the world. Do you want this insect to do its job? If so, you really don't want to put chemicals out there that will kill them or anything else around them."

Besides, there are plenty of skilled people who will come—sometimes at little or no charge—and move or

remove a hive. Contact your local extension office or your favorite local honey merchant to find one.

SPIDER

OK, this one's an arachnid and not an insect—but

spiders deserve a mention.

Just one example is the black and yellow garden spider (*Argiope aurantia*). It looks like something out of a nightmare, said Alles, but it weaves a beautiful web. If you find one, leave it and re-

turn the next day to see all the mosquitoes and other pests it's trapped.

Or, I would add, go back and read "Charlotte's Web."



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Tomato hornworm



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