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How Do I Know Which Insects Are Beneficial To My Yard?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Do I Know Which Insects Are Beneficial To My Yard?

Jerry Goodspeed answers:*

After seeing insect damage in our yards and gardens, sometimes our first instinct is to get rid of all the bugs before they multiply and invite their extended families to feast in our yards. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there are plenty of beneficial insects that are actually trying to help control the “bad guys,” and we should identify all bugs before we start zapping. Here are a few of the “good guys.”

- Ladybird beetles or ladybugs eat aphids and other small insects and are quite beneficial to gardeners. They are red and black in color and are quite recognizable on sight. The larvae are mostly black with some red markings and are about 3/8 of an inch long. The larvae are less noticeable because they do not fly and are rather unattractive. The larvae have an even more voracious appetite than adult ladybugs do. They eat up to 400 aphids and other small, soft bodied insects.
- Praying mantises begin their lives the size of a mosquito, and by summer’s end can be almost half a foot long. They prey on many insects including aphids, asparagus beetles, bean beetles, thrips, a variety of worms, mites, and insect larvae. They are considered a still hunter, and sit motionless until an unsuspecting insect comes by, then they grab it and eat it.
- Green lacewings have a larger appetite than ladybugs or praying mantises. The larvae resembles a miniature alligator. Brown and white in color, they grab their pray with a large pair of mandibles. They have a larger appetite than the adults and feed on aphids, leaf hoppers, white flies, psyllids, and insect eggs. The adult gets its name from its green body and wings. The wings have very distinctive net-like veins that give them a lacy appearance.
- Mites can damage trees, shrubs and flowers. However, there are also predacious mites that eat the “bad” mites. The “good” mites help keep the plant-eating mites in check, but have to wait for them build up in number before they begin their work. Unfortunately by that time, some plant damage has been done. Mitecide sprays kill the bad mites along with the good, so if we can be patient and tolerate a small amount of damage, the predator mites will usually move in and control the plant eating mites.

* Jerry Goodspeed is Utah State University Extension Horticulturist