

Mountain Keeping Column 5/24/07

Not All Insects Should Bug You

By Jeff Rieves

Gardeners normally wage what seems a never-ending battle with insects, mites, and other so-called pests. But there are many bugs that are beneficial to nature and to man.

Most of us are familiar with butterflies, moths, and bees. They are the pollinators of many of our fruits and vegetables. They also provide beauty and interest to our gardens.

One of the lesser-known benefits of many insects is their talent at pest control. Lady beetles, praying mantises, wasps, and spiders all play a role in controlling the voracious appetites of other, harmful bugs like aphids. The larvae of lady beetles consume aphids, mealybugs, and even some soft scales. Praying mantises hunt down and eat anything they can find, including each other. Small wasps lay eggs inside many caterpillars, and the young destroy the caterpillars as they hatch. Spiders love to catch any type of bug they can and make a meal of it.

How can we encourage all these great garden helpers? One way is to lessen the amount of pesticides we use and to use all pesticides carefully. Identify the insect that is causing you trouble and use as specific a pesticide as possible. Accepting a bit of damage will often give the predator insect time to do his or her work. Washing the bugs off the plants with a spray of water will also lessen the chance of killing off beneficial predator insects.

Many plants host populations of beneficial insects on their foliage. Dill, borage, Shasta daisy, fennel, and parsley are just a few of the plants that provide food and shelter for many beneficial insects. Water also helps attract beneficials to your garden. Shallow pools of cool, clear water will provide for many insects.

Observation and patience are your two best tools for developing populations of beneficial insects. Look for the presence of these helpful insects before you spray and spray only as needed. Give your “beneficial neighbors” time to do their work before you do anything that might rock their world.

Here are a few useful websites on identifying and attracting beneficial insects:

www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/htmpubs/7150.htm

www.coopext.colostate.edu/4dmg/PHC/benefici.htm

entweb.clemson.edu/cuentres/cesheets/

vegipm.tamu.edu/imageindex.html