

# Insects can be a good thing for gardens

By Melody Hefner

Of the more than 1 million types of insects in the world, less than 5 percent are harmful. Insects are an important part of the food web, providing a meal for other insects, birds and small mammals present in our yards. Many insects are pollinators. Without them, we would have no apples, cherries, melons or squash in our gardens.

Some insects can be nuisances but don't cause plant damage.

Beneficial insects can be considered the "good guys" of the insects present in our landscapes. They are important tools for managing insect pests in your yard. Almost every insect pest has one or more insect natural enemies.

These beneficial predator insects kill or reduce the numbers of pest insects in your yard.

Just as many insect pests are most damaging at the larval stage, so are many beneficial insects the most predacious during their larval stage. Many people will recognize a lady bird beetle or "ladybug" but are unfamiliar with its dragon-like larvae. The larvae of lady bird beetles, green lacewings, syrphid flies and snakeflies are voracious pest predators, targeting aphids and other pests present in our landscapes.

Like all animals, beneficial insects need water, food and shelter to survive. Pest insects are food for beneficial insect larvae, and sometimes for the beneficial adults. Many adult beneficial insects sip flower nectar, so providing flowering plants will attract them to your yard.

The flowers also provide shelter for many beneficial insects.

Insects require water, so providing a shallow dish or birdbath of water can also aid the good guys present in your yard. They will hang around if you treat them well.

Hopefully, the adults will lay eggs and perpetuate the beneficial insect cycle.

The balance between good and bad insects is critical to a healthy landscape. Most people are unaware of the relationship between good and bad insects in their yard until the relationship is disrupted, and insect pests begin eating their plants.

A change in weather patterns, use of a pesticide or even removal of a shrub that provides cover can disrupt the balance between good and bad insects. You can minimize this imbalance by keeping your plants vigorous and healthy throughout the year.

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