

How to Attract Beneficial Insects to Your Garden

By: Dorothy Baltz

I know what you are thinking. Why in the world would I want to attract bugs to my yard and gardens?

Because, if you didn't have the good bugs the bad bugs would take over the world!

Well, that may have been a little dramatic, but not far off. If you've read any of my other articles, then you will know how much I talk about a balance in nature. There must be evil to balance the good and good to balance the evil, otherwise chaos ensues.

So that being said, you probably want to know what is considered a good insect and what is considered a bad one? Beneficial insects include parasitic wasps, honey bees, lady beetles (ladybugs), green lacewings, hoverflies, tachinid flies and ground beetles. Destructive insects that can do a lot of damage pretty quickly include caterpillars, mealybugs, aphids, leafhoppers, grasshoppers, moths, cabbage worms, thrips, fly larvae, and grubs.

First, you need to stop using all chemical pesticides, because you will not only kill the bad bugs, but the good bugs. Once all the bad bugs are gone, whatever are left of the good bugs will leave because they have no food source, so it's not wise to try and kill off all of them. A healthy plant can withstand some damage, so don't panic over every little leaf hole or spot.

Once you have stopped using chemical pesticides, be careful with any home remedy sprays as they will kill good bugs too, if applied directly to their soft bodies. So use those only when absolutely necessary and be careful how you apply them.

The next best thing you can do to attract beneficial insects to your yard is to plant things they can use for nectar, for reproducing and for shelter. Dill, tansy, yarrow, parsley, Queen Ann's lace are all favored by parasitic wasps and green lacewings and lady beetles. Lacewings will reproduce in quiet shady areas of your yard. Other good choices are fennel and statice.

Herbs will also be attractive to beneficials. Try planting, spearmint (careful it doesn't spread too much on you), parsley, and lemon balm to attract hoverflies and tachinid flies or rosemary and thyme to shelter ground beetles.

Leaving the occasional native weed in your lawn or gardens will also help to attract many beneficial insects and may actually protect your other plants from the destructive insects. I've noticed on many occasions that the weeds may be eaten and full of bug holes, but my prized rudbeckias or dahlias next to them are not. Use organic mulches so that the beneficial bugs have a place to hide during the heat of the day.

Some insects also like to hide under piles of leaves, weeds or rocks, so leave small areas like this around your yard in an inconspicuous place, or try to work in some boulders or large rocks into your landscape.

Now that you have provided food and shelter for these creatures, like anything else, they will need water. Try watering your gardens from above once in a while, so that water collects on leaf and flower petals. You can also offer shallow water dishes filled with pebbles or sand. Butterflies like to drink from these dishes as well. Keep the water just at the top of the sand or pebbles so they don't drown or get their wings wet.

So, you've done all this but suddenly you notice an infestation of aphids on one of your plants. Before getting out the soap spray, try this first. Wait, and do nothing. You heard me right. If the plant is healthy the aphids should not damage it too severely before the lady beetles come in to feed. Watch the plant over the course of the next few days. If the aphids continue to increase without any sign of a beneficial coming in to eat them, spray them off with a sharp spray of the water hose and wait some more. The lady beetles should move in and take care of the problem. If they don't fly in, resist the urge to spray. If there is no food source, they will not come. Sometimes you need to sacrifice a plant or two for the good of the whole ecosystem. Again, if the plant is healthy, it should be able to withstand an attack.

Now I know this is probably going against everything you've ever been taught, but trust me. These methods do work. I've been practicing environmentally friendly methods of gardening since 2001, and my plants have never been healthier or happier.

For more in depth information on this subject, there is a great article on the Fine Gardening website at <http://www.finegardening.com/how-to/articles/attracting-beneficial-insects.aspx>