

## Good bugs

Southern Nevada gardens have relatively few insect pests, but since we tend to look at all insects as “the enemy”, we have the unfortunate tendency to respond to them with pesticides. We should recognize that while some insects are pests, most are not. A large number benefits humankind and we would be much worse off without them! People used to know this; Washington and Jefferson kept insectaries of beneficials to improve and protect their crops.

Many food crops rely on insects for pollination. Pumpkin flowers do not yield pumpkins unless they are pollinated, almost always by bees. The same is true for apples and other food plants. If you see perfectly round cutouts in the leaves of your landscape plants, be happy! You probably have leafcutter bees, important pollinators.

When pollinator insects are in trouble, crop plants suffer. Ultimately, we at the top of the food chain also lose.

Food is not the only place where insects perform a valuable service. The flowers we find so attractive did not become beautiful to make us happy. Many of their shapes, colors and scents

evolved to lure insects. By attracting an insect to a site with delicious nectar, the flower can spread and receive pollen. Pollinated flowers produce seeds, and the species continues.

A large number of insects kill other, pesky ones. Using these predators is often a safe alternative to pesticides, and you can find them in many garden supply catalogs. Ladybugs feast happily on aphids. Praying mantis is a remarkable looking individual that feeds on a wide range of insects. Delicate-looking dragonflies and damselflies dine on mosquitoes and other flies.



*Ladybugs feast on aphids*



*Bees pollinate*

Ground beetles come out at night to feed on several soil-borne pests. Syrphid flies, or hover flies, look like little bees. Their larvae devour aphids, young termites and ants. Lacewing adults eat pollen, but their offspring are known as “aphid lions”. They will also consume spider mites and thrips, as well as other pests. Spiders feed almost exclusively on insects.

Because we depend on certain insects to keep our environment healthy, we must be cautious using pesticides. They need to be applied carefully to avoid causing harm to people, animals, and water. Most commercial insecticides cannot differentiate between a necessary pollinator and a pest. Furthermore, since insects reproduce rapidly, they tend to develop

resistance to insecticides relatively quickly. If you must use one of the many products available, read the label completely, and follow the directions to the letter.

It is possible to lure beneficial insects and encourage them to stay. Ladybugs that have been purchased will often leave once they have eaten, or return to the site where they were first collected. Some horticulturists recommend having a pile of pine needles in the garden to encourage ladybugs to remain. Coriander, dill, parsley and fennel seem particularly attractive to beneficials, as are clover, alfalfa and yarrow. Blooming attractor plants will help keep a population of beneficial insects.

Many of these insects make their home in Southern Nevada. Information on them is available at University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

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