Not All Bugs Are Bad

Of the more than one 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. Learn to recognize both the adult and the larval stages of beneficial insects. See the photo gallery at www.manageNVpests.info.

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.

As with all pest control plans, you first have to identify the pest. Many plant problems result from non-living causes, such as too much or too little water. Make sure you actually have a pest before you develop a pest control plan.

Stressed plants are susceptible to pests. Make sure your plants are placed in a compatible spot in your landscape, your soil is healthy and you’re watering and fertilizing appropriately.

Insect management does not mean killing every insect in your yard. Eliminating all pest insects reduces your population of beneficial predator insects also. Pest insects attract the good insects
that eat them. The key is to find a pest level you can tolerate and let nature take its course.
Check out a photo gallery of the most common insect pests at www.mangeNVpests.info.

Be cautious about using pesticides. They may kill beneficial insects, both the predators and the pollinators. If pesticides are used repeatedly, they can actually increase the pest problem. Identify the pest and its life cycle. Then develop a pest control plan that will target the pest at its most vulnerable stage.

Beneficial insects are available commercially for release into your garden. You must follow label directions carefully for good results. Beneficial insects released in your garden may not stick around if they find food, shelter or water elsewhere.

Keep your plants healthy and provide a safe haven for beneficial insects in your yard. This will aid in reducing insect pests without the use of pesticides.
Tips For Boosting Populations of Beneficial Insects in Your Yard

*Plant more flowers.* Flowers attract and provide nectar and shelter for beneficial insects.

*Provide a source of fresh water.* A bird bath or shallow container of water will do the trick.

*Accept a level of pest insects that will attract more good insects.* The beneficial insects need something to eat.

*Know before you act.* Identify the insect pest before you take action so you don’t do more harm than good.

*Use insecticides only as a last resort.* They can kill your beneficial insects.

Tips For Protecting Your Plants From Insect Pests

*Water and fertilize your plants appropriately.* This keeps your plants healthy and reduces stress. Stressed plants are more susceptible to pests and diseases.

*Choose plants that are adapted to our climate and soils.* Our climate is dry with very low humidity and our soils are alkaline. Don’t choose a plant for your landscape that likes high humidity and acidic soil.

*Choose plants that will thrive in the specific growing conditions present on your site.* Don’t plant a shade-loving plant in a site that gets full afternoon sun. Don’t choose a plant that likes well-drained soil if your soil doesn’t drain well. These types of poor choices cause plant stress, making plants more susceptible to pests and disease.

*Don’t get pests in the first place.* Add only pest-free mulch, fill dirt or top soil to your site. Purchase high-quality, disease- and pest-free plants for your landscape.

*Accept some pests.* Your goal should be keeping the pest population from getting too large, not eliminating every insect from your landscape.
Pictures:

Lady Bird Beetles: Larvae on the left and in the background, two adults on the right. All are voracious aphid eaters! Photo by Wendy Hanson-Mazet, UNCE.
The adult green lacewing above sips nectar, but the green lacewing larvae below preys on aphids and other insect pests. Photo above by Sue Donaldson, UNCE; photo below by Bradley Higbee, Paramount Farming, bugwood.org.
This praying mantis is a common predator insect that will eat many other insects, including other praying mantids. Photo by Wendy Hanson-Mazet, UNCE.