



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Gardening Naturally: Invite the "Good Guys" into Your Yard (July 20, 2024)

by Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Are insects invading your yard this summer? If you're like most gardeners, your response is yes! Just when your plants start blooming, here come the pests! But wait; before reaching for bug spray, be aware of beneficial creatures or "good guys" working naturally for you.

Among the beneficials are many insects, such as lacewings, lady beetles (ladybugs), praying mantis, minute pirate bugs, big-eyed bugs, damsel bugs, syrphid (hover) fly larvae, spiders and predatory mites, parasitic wasps, and flies. These good guys feed on aphids, mealybugs, mites, thrips, scales, whiteflies, insect eggs, and some pesty caterpillars and beetles.

What? Do you think that your garden should have no insects at all? Get real! Don't blame all insects for the damage caused by a few. Insects help make the world go round, and even "bad" bugs play a role in the environmental cycle. It's only when some insect populations get too high that they overbalance that cycle and become a nuisance--or create real damage.



There are other beneficial critters in our gardens besides insects. Bats are terrific good guys that eat huge quantities of night-flying insects. Birds, both domestic and wild, also consume lots of insects. Toads and frogs should be welcomed in the yard; they are out of sight during the day and busy at night helping themselves to their favorite insects and slugs. Even snakes help keep the rodent population under control (but we prefer them in the countryside, not our yards).

Oh, yes, there are even microscopic fungi, bacteria, viruses, protozoans, and nematodes that help battle against certain insects and soil-borne disease-causing fungi. *Bacillus thuringiensis*, called "BT" for short, is a bacteria that's completely harmless to people, pets, and most insects, including beneficials, but it does a great job on caterpillars. BT works on cabbage worms, cutworms, tomato hornworms, and budworms--common pests on tomatoes, peppers, corn, and many annual and perennial flowers, including petunias and geraniums. It is considered environmentally friendly because it is selective (does not affect a broad range of insects) and biodegradable.

Additional strains of BT work better on mosquitoes, fungus gnats, Colorado potato beetles, and elm leaf beetles. Another bacteria, *Beauveria bassiana*, combats aphids and whiteflies. The granulosis virus is a natural enemy of the codling moth, a common pest of apples, pears, and walnuts. Take note: if you have a pond, there is even a tiny fish called *Gambusia* that eats mosquito larvae.



You can encourage more good guys to inhabit your yard and let them work their magic. Start by growing plants known to attract them. There are blends of insectary plants available at nurseries that attract and provide a habitat for beneficial insects. Using insectary plants helps provide season-long pest management. Beneficial insects are present when pest insects arrive later in the season. So before pest populations exceed tolerable levels, the beneficial population controls the pest. Usually, the gardener is unaware that a pest has threatened the garden.

If you want the good guys to take care of the bad guys, then protect the good guys with integrated pest management (IPM). IPM includes tolerating minor damage to plants, handpicking and destroying some of the bad guys, and using botanical pesticides and insecticidal soaps. In severe infestations, the IPM recommendation is to use selective chemicals and avoid broad-spectrum insect killers. For more information on IPM: <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/menu.homegarden.html>

Chemical pesticides are often more devastating to beneficial insect populations than pest populations. Less toxic products are insecticidal soaps and highly refined summer oils. A summer oil kills by suffocating pests rather than poisoning them. Other insecticides derived from natural sources include pyrethrins (from a flower in the chrysanthemum family) and Neem oil (from neem tree seeds). These "natural" pesticides are synthetically manufactured and easy to use. You'll find them on store shelves with the chemical insecticides.

In conclusion, invite the "good" guys to keep your "bad" guys in check, and your garden will be well-balanced.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot
Hanford Thursday Night Farmers' Market, 219 W Lacey Blvd, Hanford, 5:30 pm, through Sept.

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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