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Bugs: Friends or Foes?

Gardeners are protective of their plants – after all, in the time they spend selecting, planting and caring for them it's easy to become attached. So when bugs are spotted crawling on leaves and buds, gardeners become concerned. Often, the first reaction is to kill the bug before even identifying it. But there's a good reason not to reach for that pesticide bottle so quickly: some bugs are good bugs - predators that prey on bugs gardeners want to be rid of.

Identifying bugs may not be the most exciting part of gardening but if you take the time to learn about a bug you may find it's to your advantage to let it make a home in your garden.

Let's take a look at few bugs gardeners should welcome to their gardens.

GOOD BUGS:

Hover fly (family Syrphidae): a 1/10 to 1-1/2 inch long black, blue, metallic striped or spotted fly; larva is slug-like and tapered at one end. The adult hover fly is a pollinator that feeds on nectar and pollen. The larva consumes aphids, thrips and small caterpillars. Some species of hover flies disguise themselves as bees or wasps but they can be distinguished from bees and wasps by their hovering ability, two wings and short antennae.

Rove beetle (family Staphylinidae): up to ¾ inches long with a long, narrow body, visible abdomen and often hairy. Rove beetles live in the soil and help out by eating grubs, maggots, ants and aphids. They are active at night and will occasionally crawl up plants to consume aphids.

Wolf spider (family Lycosidae): long-legged, gray or brown and somewhat hairy. The wolf spider does not spin a web but instead runs along the ground eating insects and other organisms.

Minute pirate bug (*Orius tristicolor* and other species): tiny, oval and flat with pointed heads, dark, with whitish wing markings. There are several species of this bug, all of which consume spider mites, thrips and aphids. Although they may bite if handled, their bite is not poisonous.

Green lacewing (family Chrysopidae): 3/8 to 1 in long, green with gold eyes and large, veined wings. Both the nymph and adult lacewing are aggressive

consumers of aphids, as well as spider mites, leafhoppers, thrips and some insect eggs.

Lady beetle or lady bug (family Coccinellidae): 1/8 to 1/4 inch long, bright red or orange, round beetle with black spots. A well-known friend who eats aphids.

Bees and wasps: yes, they can be a bit scary but without these pollinators there would be no flowers. Remembering the essential role pollinators play will help gardeners respect them and even welcome them.

Along with knowing which bugs are enemies and which are friends, there are other ways to protect your plants against harmful bugs.

Grow a variety of plants: this will reduce damage if your garden is hit by a host-specific bug (one that feeds on only type of plant). A variety of plants also attracts more beneficial insects.

Eliminate plants that attract bugs: if your experience shows that a certain plant has a tendency to attract harmful bugs, then do yourself a favor and dig it out!

Maintain healthy plants: plants that are not stressed by lack of water or nutrients and that are growing in their preferred situation are able to withstand most assaults by harmful bugs.

The information in this article is taken from "The Prairie Gardener's Book of Bugs: A Guide to Living with Common Garden Insects" by Nora Bryan and Ruth Staal.