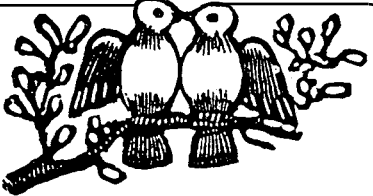


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LARVA OF PAINTED LADY BUTTERFLY
PHOTO BY ROBIN B. CUSHMAN

Insects & Gardens

IS IT TIME FOR A TRUCE? by Rachel Foster

Insects are Earth's dominant animal life-form, and they've been around for 400 million years. Humans have existed for a mere 100,000 years. Scientists recognize nearly a million insect species, and estimate that up to 29 million remain to be discovered. As individuals, insects outnumber people by half a billion to one. In a contest between humans and insects, it's pretty clear who will win. Entomologist and gardener Eric Grisell thinks it may be time for a truce.

In the U.S. alone, we apply about a billion pounds of pesticides to our soil, forests, crops and gardens in a single year. Most of this stuff is useless and occasionally worse than useless at preventing insect damage (I once read that the fraction of commercial crops lost to insects is about the same today as it was before WWII) and, of course, it is toxic. But you knew that. What you may not know, according to Grisell, is that there are more bugs in your garden than you think. Gardeners mostly notice larger species that are out and about in the daytime, and the ones that do perceptible damage to a leaf or a flower. The other 1,500 or so we are largely unaware of, yet almost all of them are doing something useful.

Last week, in a talk addressed to a gathering of gardeners, Grisell made it clear that where insects are concerned we often know less than we think we do. Specifically, we know little about what our insects are really doing. Gardeners dislike earwigs, yet most of them (and there are hundreds of species, by the way) prey on the eggs of other insects. On the other hand the praying mantis, an insect predator that most of us know and value, is an indiscriminate killer, as likely to feed on bees and butterflies as on insects we think of as pests. Mantids even kill snakes and humming birds. The "pest" gardeners call a rose slug is the larva of a wasp which serves as a pollinator. Yellow jackets hunt caterpillars. Mosquitoes provide food for many animals. And both serve as pollinators, too.

Pollination is isn't the only vital role performed by insects. Those that are predators and parasites help to regulate other insects. Flies, ants, beetles and butterflies feed on dead plants and animals and dung, an invaluable clean-up job.

The message I came away with is that we gardeners should forget about *good* insects and *bad* insects, and concern ourselves instead about *balance*. Insects become pests when insect life is out of balance, and Grisell listed four situations that make this happen: introduction of an alien insect; the use of chemicals; the existence of monocultures; and loss of habitat.

When a garden plant falls victim to an alien insect, the easiest option may be to remove the plant. (This also applies in a situation Grisell did not specify: when the gardener plants something, often an exotic, that proves especially susceptible to insect damage.) Another option is timely treatment with the least toxic remedy. Grisell cited an example from his own garden, the attack of an Eastern hemlock by the woolly adelgid. In this case, two staggered sprayings with either insecticidal soap or horticultural oil, timed to the reproductive cycle of the insect, would probably have controlled the problem. Grisell waited too long, and lost the tree. Perhaps he could have saved the tree had he chosen to spray with a more toxic synthetic chemical. The trouble is, such insecticides are indiscriminate. They may kill the target pest, but they also throw the insect population out of balance.

Lawns and rose beds, gardening's commonest monocultures, account for a huge share of garden chemical use (and, shamefully, gardeners use more pesticide than farmers do). Both attract destructive insects while reducing the diversity that could foster organisms to control them. Mixing roses in with other flowers and minimizing the area of lawn can go some way to reducing insect damage. It is also helpful to feed your lawn organically and weed it, if at all, by hand, maintaining a healthy, balanced soil fauna. Within the garden, monoculture and loss of habitat are two sides of the same coin. Diversity yields complexity yields balance.

Natural insect habitat outside our yards is constantly being eroded. We can help make up for that by the way we garden. We need to be messier! Gardens may also benefit from being weedier (don't you love it when someone exhorts you to do less?). Leaf litter and weeds provide shelter and food for insects of all sorts. And, of course, we can plant many herbs and ornamentals that support insect life. The mint family (mint, anise hyssop), the carrot family (dill, parsley, fennel), the sunflower family (daisies, yarrow) and the onion family are particularly rich in plants that support a myriad of insects.

Eric Grisell, who spoke to the Willamette Valley Hardy Plant Group on April 8, is author of *Insects and Gardens* (Timber Press). Another book with useful information on gardening with insects is *Gaia's Garden* by Toby Hemenway (Chelsea Green). Note: The annual plant sale sponsored by the Hardy Plant Group, Rock Garden Society and Garden Clubs is scheduled for 9 am to 2 pm May 10 at the Lane County Fairgrounds.

CW

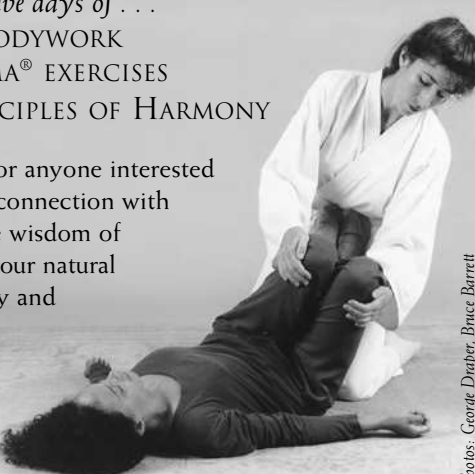
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