



Banking on Beetles

What happened to my aphids?

If your garden existed in a state of balance — perhaps grace would be a better term — you would be able to ignore insects almost completely and get on with the real purpose of your life, which is to weed. — ERIC GRISSELL

The first few years after we converted a patch of grass into a garden, aphids were a conspicuous spring feature, especially on rose shoots. I rubbed them off with my fingers, blasted them with water and occasionally resorted to insecticidal soap, but they still hung around until the rains stopped in June or July. Weevils used to be a problem, too. Now insect pests rarely attract my notice, and even slugs are scarcely an issue. What has changed in our yard that might account for this? I suspect that, mostly inadvertently, we have provided a mixed environment that's increasingly friendly to insects.

If this sounds like a paradox, read on. In his book *Insects and Gardens: In Pursuit of a Garden Ecology*, Eric Grissell pointed out that an overwhelming majority of insects are not harmful in the garden. They are, on the contrary, either beneficial or (from a gardener's point of view) neutral. Beneficials include pollinators and miniature garbage disposal units, but they also include a vast array of insects that prey on other insects. Lady beetles and their larvae feed mainly on aphids, but some eat mites, scale insects and even mildew. Ground beetles prey on slugs, snails, mites and insects that can be harmful to garden flowers and vegetables. Hoverfly and lacewing larvae eat aphids voraciously. Parasitic wasps knock out not only aphids but cabbage loopers and cutworms, too.

Grissell proposed that insects become pests only when insect life is out of balance. The more diverse and biologically friendly the environment, the more insects there will be and the more likely they will live in equilibrium with one another and other elements in the environment. Things that throw insect populations out of balance include the use of chemicals and the existence of plant monocultures. Our yard is mostly filled with big, closely planted beds of shrubs and flowering perennials. Since our two small areas of grass were invaded by prunella, clover and other things, we have no monocultures, and on the rare occasions we use pesticides we use only non-persistent remedies like soap, sulfur and bicarbonate of soda. We also keep outdoor

lights to a minimum, and don't use bug zappers (95 percent of the insects they kill are not mosquitoes, apparently).

Actively promoting diversity is particularly valuable to vegetable gardeners, who must inevitably plant some monocultures. Organic farmers use flowering insectary rows and weed patches to attract beneficial insects such as hoverflies and parasitic wasps. In Britain, to counter the disappearance of the hedgerows that once formed a reservoir of biological variety, farmers and conservationists invented the "beetle bank," a raised area of tussocky perennial grasses and weeds that provides habitat for predatory ground beetles and other insects as well as spiders, small mammals and ground-nesting birds which, of course, also eat insects. Conservation strips, a combination of these two ideas, are now being studied in several places in North America.

We can easily adapt these methods for our gardens. What's the best "beetle bank" for a little yard? Beetles and spiders need a dry, airy environment with lots of decaying vegetable matter, so the cooler parts of a compost heap can be perfect. Within the garden, you could make room for an old half-wine barrel filled with potting soil and planted with hummocky grass — orchard grass and timothy are classic, but a clumping native or ornamental grass would do fine — perhaps our native tufted hairgrass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*. Loose mulches and dead perennial tops also provide a winter home for beetles and other insects. Like many gardeners, I now cut back perennials in spring instead of fall. We enjoy late flowers and fall color; the bugs enjoy the mess.

Large areas of lawn are easily modified by leaving certain areas unmowed. In a small garden, one or two corners could be left uncut and enriched with flowers that encourage beneficial insects. Members of the daisy, mustard, mint and carrot families are widely cited. Carol Savonen, a science communications specialist at OSU, recommends "a mix of yarrow, wild buckwheat, white sweet clover, tansy, sweet fennel, sweet alyssum, spearmint, Queen Anne's lace, hairy vetch, flowering buckwheat, crimson clover, cowpeas, common knotweed, caraway and black locust." Lucky me, two of my neighbors have black locust trees. **EW**

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