

Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinics

By Virgene Link

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Invite helpful predators into your garden: if you remove the good predators, you'll have to do their job

Loving butterflies and ladybugs comes easily. All too often though, we rail against caterpillars and “crawly” things. Guess what? Before their complete metamorphosis the butterfly and lady beetle (lady bug) were crawly things!! It's rather an “Ugly Duckling” kind of story and comes with a happy ending.

Many homeowners have pest problems because their yards are not inviting to predators and parasites that naturally keep unwelcome pesky creatures under control. Herein lies the problem--keeping the balance in the “balance of nature”. In order to have beneficial insects there must be insects for them to eat that are not beneficial. To have NO insects takes the hum and tune of activity from our yards, would inhibit pollination, and isn't possible anyway. There is a reason for the quote that “nature abhors a vacuum”.

So invite the predators into your yard by planting their favorite flowers and some native plants on which their young can hide and develop. Leave a clump or two of weedy grass, a pile of brush under which they can hide or burrow, and even a bare patch or two of dirt that is sheltered by overhanging growth were bumblebees can burrow.

Some predators are delicate looking like the green and brown lacewings. Others like rove beetles or centipedes are quick and startling. Minute pirate bugs are small, only 2-5 mm, and no they don't have peg legs or wear eye patches.

Our native insects have evolved with our native plants. So plant native trees where possible like fir, hemlock, Pacific ninebark, maple and vine maple. Native ornamental shrubs include Oregon grape, salal, red flowering currant, mock orange and snowberry. Native flowers and ground covers include columbine, native bleeding heart, dogbane, pussytoes, ferns, bunchberry and kinnikinnik.

Blooms these creatures like best include asters, coneflowers, tickseeds (coreopsis) and other daisy-like native wildflowers. Also plant culinary herbs that have inverted parasol-shaped inflorescences like dill and parsley. Mingle these favored flowers in your planting beds or mass them in large patches to attract beneficials. Have a selection of plants with different flowering times (blooming across most months of the year). Then if a bumblebee or predatory wasp comes out of hibernation too early on a warm spring day or late fall day she can find some sweet nectar and nutritious pollen.



Above left: The tiny (one-eighth inch) minute pirate bug has a big appetite for aphids, thrips, young caterpillars and insect eggs. Both the yellow-orange nymphs and black-and-white adult minute pirate bugs are beneficial predators. (Photo by Jack Kelly Clark / University of California) **Above right:** Voracious lady bug larvae, and adult lady beetles, like to gobble up pesky aphids and other sap-sucking insects. Get to know this odd-looking beneficial little helper, and encourage other gardeners to let it be. (Photo courtesy Virgene Link / Skagit County Master Gardeners)

Combine plants of varying heights to create a structurally diverse habitat. Leave fallen stems and leaves in your beds (unless they have fungus spots or spores that you don't want to over winter). Leaf litter layers provide habitat for beetles, spiders, infinitesimal wasps and other important predators (like the pirate bugs).

Always identify before you squish or swat! Some beneficial insects are unfamiliar and some microscopic. And some insects are "just interesting"--a combination of good and bad or not necessarily good or bad.



Though quite small at 7 mm long, the thread-legged bug uses its needle-like mouthparts to suck the life from its prey — aphids, leafhoppers, caterpillars, fly larvae and bed bugs. (Photo courtesy Skagit County Master Gardeners)

to the harmful ones. Pesticides (and herbicides) also end up in our waterways, polluting Puget Sound and poisoning sea life.

Learn to tolerate minor infestations of "bad guys". The good guys need something to eat! Then you can have a healthy garden and a lot of nature to enjoy and explore.

A good way to have an insect identified is to take it to the Master Gardener Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic. The Burlington Plant and Insect Clinic operates from 10 AM to 2 PM on Wednesdays, from April through October. Samples can be dropped off at the WSU Skagit County Extension Office on other days during office hours. The office is located at 11768 Westar Lane, Burlington (near the Skagit County Airport).

Remember not all beneficial organisms are small insects. Birds, bats and garter snakes help too. Provide native trees and shrubs where animals can rest and raise their young. Lay off the pesticides which cause as much harm to the beneficial insects as

Local Master Gardener Plant Clinics:

Anacortes Plant Clinic

Where: Anacortes Senior Center
1701 – 22nd Street
When: Thursdays – April through September
Time: 9 AM to 12 Noon

Burlington Plant Clinic

Where: Skagit County Extension Office
11768 Westar Lane, Suite A
(located at the Port of Skagit County/Airport)
When: Wednesdays – April through October
Time: 10 AM to 2 PM

For information on all clinics, call the WSU Skagit County Extension, 360-428-4270 ext. 0.

Resources:

- “*Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast,*” by Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon, Lone Pine Press, Vancouver BC, 3rd edition, 2004.
- “*Insects of Skagit County,*” by Lloyd Eighme, 2010. Available at WSU Skagit County Extension, Burlington.