

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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The weekend has finally arrived and a tour of the garden with it. Take stock of what is up and growing, and peer closely at each plant. What is visible? Insects—and plenty of them.

Spiders of all sizes lie in wait for unsuspecting prey. An insect that looks like a tiny black-and-orange alligator meanders along rose stems. A black beetle busies itself on pyracantha flowers. Yellow jackets buzz.

What is an appropriate reaction? Scream and flee the scene? Knock insects off the plants and step on them? Grab a can of insecticide and spray everything?

If the answer was “yes” to any of these questions, read on.

Not every bug in the garden is out to decimate flowers, vegetables, or fruits. Some are there only to eat the bugs that *are* looking to consume the plants or produce gardeners work so hard to grow. We call these diminutive helpers “beneficials”; let’s take a look at some most likely to be found in a Skagit County garden.

Spiders are predators, munching on aphids, caterpillars, flies, and just about anything else that crosses their paths. In Skagit County you’re most likely to run across the common garden spider (which spins a web to trap insects) and the crab spider (which lies in wait on plants and ambushes unsuspecting insects). In eastern Washington, the black widow and brown recluse spiders are cause for concern; here in western Washington, bites from them are rare since the wetter climate is not to their liking.

Centipedes are drawn to moist, dark places, and are fierce predators. They look like a short length of reddish-brown wire lined with legs. They hunt at night and will eat almost anything that doesn’t eat them.

Predacious ground beetles will eat aphids, spider mites, thrips, and small insects in the larval stage. Some even eat slugs. They like dark, moist earth, and ground covers, which provide a place for them to hide and hunt for food. To attract them, place baskets, chunks of wood, and rocks on the ground.

Soldier beetles prefer meatier fare than plants. Although they enjoy nectar, they’re even more partial to aphids, grasshoppers, gypsy moths, spider mites, slugs, grubs, cutworms, and cankerworms. Milkweed, wild lettuce, and hydrangea are favored plants.

Remember the little alligator-looking insect on your rose? That was a **lady beetle** larvae—an immature ladybug. Ladybeetles and their larvae feed on scale insects, mealybugs, aphids, and whiteflies. To attract them to the garden, plant butterfly weed, angelica, marigolds, and yarrow.

Yellow jackets and paper wasps are quite similar in appearance (the paper wasp is slightly smaller and has no black spots on its abdomen) and may seem like pests to humans, but they are beneficial insects, feeding mostly on caterpillars, flies, and aphids.

Honey bees are important pollinators. They love fruit blossoms and pretty much any flower, especially monarda and germander. Washington state’s legendary cherry and apple industries would be almost nonexistent without honey bees’ hard work.

Orchard mason bees are great pollinators, too, and are even more hardworking than honey bees, becoming active earlier each year than honeybees, and working later. They do not produce honey or wax, but they can’t sting, either, which makes them a favorite among children. To attract them, provide a suitable home (search the Internet for instructions).

Syrphid flies are pollinators that double as predators: Their larvae feast on aphids. To attract syrphid flies, plant coriander, dill, coreopsis, cosmos, sunflower, tansy, broccoli, sweet allysum, pincushion, and buckwheat.

Parasitic wasps are so small, you might never even notice them. They lay eggs inside caterpillars and a host of other bugs. When the eggs hatch, the hapless host insect is doomed. Adult parasitic wasps are drawn to parsley, thyme, rosemary, dill, fennel, sage, and allysum—any plant with small flowers.

The next time you see an insect you don’t recognize, take a deep breath, count to ten, and try to determine if it’s helping or hurting your garden. The chances are good that you’re witnessing a beneficial insect in action, one soldier in an army of little helpers.

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Want to learn more?

Sidebar body:

Helpful bulletins on beneficial insects are available from the Washington State University Extension. Visit the WSU Publications Web site at <http://pubs.wsu.edu/>. Here are some of the titles available:

- WSU bulletin PNW0550 “Encouraging Beneficial Insects in Your Garden”
- WSU bulletin EBO648 “Organic Gardening”
- WSU bulletin EBO643 “Yellow Jackets and Paper Wasps”

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.